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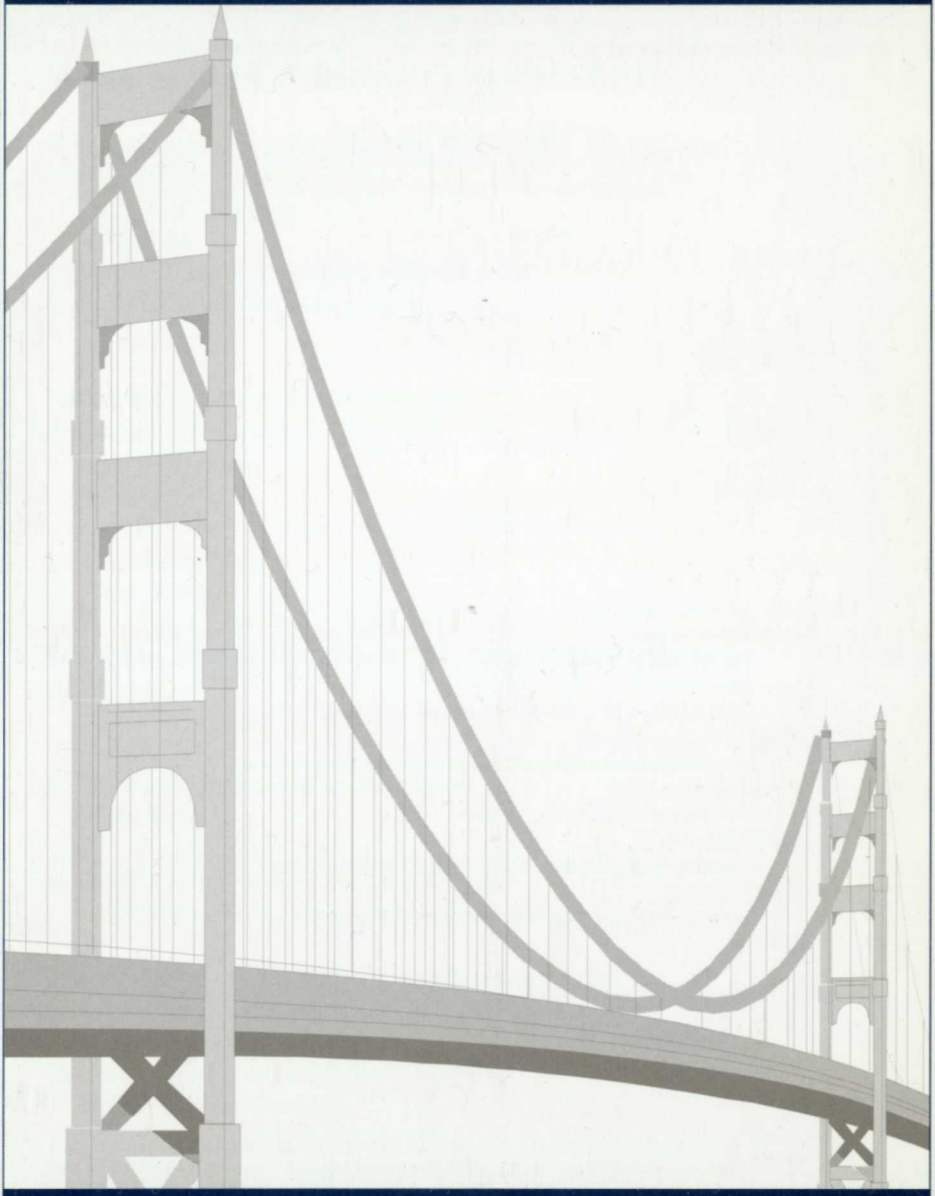

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What Does the Man See? Searching The Crossing for McCarthy's Vision of Mexico

Bruce W. Coggin

Since Cormac McCarthy moved, as did so many before him, from Tennessee to Texas and settled in El Paso, his attention has turned considerably toward Mexico. The novels of the Border Trilogy are set there, at least in part. Easily eighty percent of the action in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* takes place in Mexico, as well as perhaps half that in *Cities of the Plain.* Yet the reader who is familiar with Mexico encounters in these books a place not always recognizable. Even though he takes great pain to show us that he really *knows* the geography and the language—the countryside is described in often overweening detail, city streets are named, he infamously writes long stretches in flawed Spanish—Mr. McCarthy is nonetheless using Mexico to some degree figuratively, a place that might never have been or might have been or. . .in the best tradition of writers who send their heroes questing in lands afar. Taking him at his word, a reader should try to see what McCarthy intends with his half-realist half-customized Mexico, indeed probably cannot very well come to terms with the books until he has answered the question, what *does* the man see in Mexico? What is his vision of this real yet imagined place?

All three books are laden with clichés fetched from the repertoire of travel posters and B-grade movies—brooding, untamed mountain panoramas; dark-eyed maidens who appear from nowhere bringing food and drink; baronial *haciendas* inhabited by sophisticated landlords, wise but difficult elderly women, and breathtakingly lovely *señoritas*; wicked *bandido* types who make life miserable or worse; dirt-poor but happy peasants; and a fetid underworld of criminals, jails, pimps, and whores. Mexico looks best in *Horses*; in *Cities* it is reduced to border-town saloons and whorehouses. In both those novels, the narrative works its way in and through the setting stoutly enough, does not get bogged down in too much gazing about and letting the presence of Mexico (as conceived by the author) steal the show. *Horses* certainly could not have happened anywhere else but in Mexico. A version of the Mexican Revolution recalled motivates action. Yet generally Mexico remains *setting*. In *Cities*, Mexico is a nasty place across a border, luridly set off against the idyllic guy-dominated world north of the river, with minor adjustments, the story

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of a rube in love with a whore could have taken place just about anywhere. So even if one might carp about a detail here and there, the stage-set Mexico McCarthy presents in the first and last novels of the trilogy does not shock particularly.

In *The Crossing*, however, things are far different. There are three successive narratives, not one, three sad tales of noble failure which conceivably could have taken place almost anywhere on the planet where there are wolves and bad guys. To be sure, McCarthy hauls us up hill and down across the Chihuahuan *sierra* in his usual attentive, ruminative way, as when Billy and the wolf first cross into Mexico.

> They rode up off the plain in the final dying light man and wolf and horse over a terrace land of low hills much eroded by the wind and they crossed through a fenceline or crossed where a fenceline once had been, the wires long down and rolled and carried off and the little naked mesquite posts wandering single file away into the night like an enfilade of bent and twisted pensioners. (*Crossing*, 73)

There is plenty of this in the book, but it generally is not arresting. Though the reader gets absolutely worn out clippety-clopping back and forth over seemingly endless roads and trails, the geography of Mexico does not affect the narrative materially. But there is something else: the people Billy runs into along the road—now *they* are unusual.

The differences between *The Crossing* and the novels which flank it in the trilogy are many and have been commented on at length in various places (see note in the Bibliography at end). The critical and popular tumult following the publication of *Horses* did not repeat for *Crossing*. Not only is the novel a full quarter longer than either of the two other two, its whole mood is different—darker, portentous, at times unintentionally bathetic. The feature which most notably separates *Crossing* from the other two is the *ad seriatim* appearance of a group of people—a moribund old trappr, a carny "diva," a failed priest, an ox driver—a true motley who unload page upon page (these episodes comprise at least fifteen percent of the book) of anecdotal or aphoristic philosophizing. We are treated variously to disquisitions on the fleetingness of existence, on the battle between orthodoxy and free thought, on the meaning of journeys, on story-telling, on the nature of oxen, and more—all in an arch, *faux* archaic language which costumes the moments, separating them sharply from the ongoing narrative, which momentarily comes to a grinding halt. An attempt to penetrate those airy discourses follows soon, but one things is clear: if we are to believe McCarthy, Mexico is overrun with rustic, reclusive theologues who will at the slightest provocation provide the casual passer-by with lofty thoughts on the high themes of life and death. A fellow dare not stop in a stream to let his horse drink lest he encounter a drover who tells him that "the ox was an animal close to God as all the world knew and that perhaps the silence and the rumination of the ox was something like the shadow of a greater silence, a deeper thought" (*Crossing*, 235-236). This abundance of randomly encountered roadside philosophers in Mexico might strike some readers as puzzling.

Of course, McCarthy is using an old

technique here. From Cervantes forward, novelists have used the chance encounter between travelers or other circumstantial meetings to interrupt one narrative and insert another. Three well known examples: the Man of the Hill in *Tom Jones* takes up several short chapters with his extended tale of woe; Ivan's "poem" of the Grand Inquisitor takes up a chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*; and "June Second 1910" in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* interweaves the narrative of Quentin Compson's stuttering progess to suicide with the shattered recollection of the events which have propelled him thither. An interruption in the main narrative is not in itself unusual. But in *The Crossing* interruption occurs no fewer than nine times, and there are minor intrusions in other places. Certainly Mr. McCarthy has something on his mind, and to say it he uses his clutch of peripatetic word-spinners. What then do these seers *see*? And, consequently, what does McCarthy see?

The often flummed-up diction of the sayers Billy encounters can make following the train of thought dicey, but when the monologues are shorn of their trappings, it is possible to essay a restatement of their principal points in plainer language. Here goes.

The first encounter takes place in New Mexico in fact, the subject a dessicated, moribund half-*brujo* wolf-trapper to whom Billy goes looking for wolf-bait. Lying on a smelly cot in a dark cubicle, the old man grasps Billy's hand dramatically and responds to his questions. The exchange is in Spanish, or rather in McCarthy's own *espanglés*, mixing the two languages whimsically. Billy ask for bait, but he gets more than bait back. He learns that the wolf knows, as men do not, "that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there," that men "drink the blood of God" frivolously. Men live in the illusion of their "acts and ceremonies," but they never apprehend a world which is like the wolf, like the snowflake, is ephemeral, "made of breath only." He suggests Billy look for a spot to set his trap where fire has already charred the earth, a place where "God sits and conspires in the destruction of that which he has been at such pains to create" (*Crossing*, 46-47). According to the old man, then, the world is in God's purview, but God cooperates in its destruction, indeed destruction in death imposes whatever order indwells the world. Men move through life without grasping its seriousness.

After Billy's mercy killing of the wolf he hoped to return to the wild, his life divided by the "doomed enterprise" into "the then and the now" (*Crossing*, 129), he rides west. He runs across a "wild Indian" (not a Yaqui) who warns him that the world does not contain men but rather vice versa, and to know the world one must know men; and to know men, one must live among them and not merely pass through (*Crossing*, 134). Life is a social enterprise, not an endless wandering. But Billy rides on to find the abandoned village of Huisiachepic in whose collapsing church lives a recluse calling himself the custodian, and apostate Mormon become Roman Catholic, a failed priest who claims the status of "heretic," earlier claimed by the old *brujo*. This persons spins for nearly twenty pages (*Crossing*, 141-158) a tale within a tale within a tale. He tells of a child or

phaned by one earthquake who grows to manhood and loses his own child to another. Outraged, devastated, he becomes a non-person until moved one day to feel himself called to be a messenger, no matter the message. Returning to the church which was the scene of his orphaning, an edifice in a state of marvelously suspended collapse, he takes up residence in it, railing and ranting about God. On his deathbed, he accepts that despite all his logic chopping, God has foxed him and will not be understood. He dies declaring that one is all and all is one and all is God and the priest had best save himself. The priest, it turns out, is none other than the "custodian" who tells the tale, which ends with an affirmation of God's grace. His sermon hopes to sound daring and unorthodox and simple—but in fact sounds an awful lot like St. Paul in his better moments. What the episode *appears* to be—it tortuous and far from lucid—is a kind of One Man's Journey to Faith account: man, crushed by cruel circumstance, curses God and hopes to die, recoils upon his own solitude, yet in his suffering feels called to witness to an innate and indelible sense of God within him. When he challenges received religion, it temporizes and condoles, then is routed, leaving man in the barren waste of his own rebellion, disconsolate but still expectant. At his end, man stands alone before God's incomprehensibility and accepts it, all the while still yearning for salvation—which, according to the priest-janitor, is his because in the end "we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace" (*Crossing* 158). The tale told, Billy saddles up and rides on.

Joined by his brother Boyd, Billy asks directions from an old man who draws a map and leaves. The map elicits commentary from three bystanders. One declares that the map is false and that following a false guide is worse than no guide at all, advice another corroborates, adding that a false guide might cause them to distrust their own instincts. This is Emerson-scented counsel: fie on false guides (with the prejudice that most are so) and full speed ahead with instinct, an echo from the previous encounter (*Crossing*, 184-186). Not long afterward, the boys run across a cattleman, aware of their purpose and their plight, who advises them to go home. He tells Billy that acts have unexpected consequences. He must be sure that "the intention in your heart is large enough to contain all wrong turnings, all disappointments" (*Crossing*, 202). Counseled previously to follow his instinct, Billy now is cautioned that his intent hardly matters.

The boys next fall in with a troupe of carnival gypsies. Billy watches the "diva" of the lot bathing nude in a tank, then settles down with her for a discussion ranging from the best way to handle recalcitrant mules to the relation between truth and illusion in the theater. Finally, as he and Boyd are about to depart, the woman gives sybilline advice about journeys in language of notable slipperiness: "The road has its own reasons and no two travelers will have the same understanding of those reasons. . . . The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage begun upon it will be completed" (*Crossing,* 230). This may mean that even when two share an

endeavor—a life?—neither will see it as the other does, that the endeavor is unique and will be finished, one way or another. Shortly thereafter, the boys stop to water their horses and meet the old man driving the philosophical oxen mentioned earlier (*Crossing*, 235-236). God dwells not only in the hearts of men but in the inscrutable souls of his other creatures as well.

Boyd having been shot by miscreants, Billy turns him over to a truckload of field hands passing by and takes refuge in the isolated home of a woman and her old, dying husband, horribly blinded during the Revolution twenty years earlier. The two tell his story of being blinded and living blind, becoming a "sage," and finally achieving insight. Those insights are among the most overlapping and confusing offered the hapless Billy. Calling himself "a voice to speak in a darkness incommensurable with the motives of life," the old man says the world is hidden, sentient, and unseeable. Men struggle in confusion, dumbly repeating tasks like Sysiphus, falling through darkness—but a darkness with a bottom, a ground from which one makes (repeated?) beginnings. Most men do not know they are confused. The "righteousness" they seek is only order; evil is the real thing. Some men have learned that people will resist small evils but acquiesce in great ones. Such men use evil to satisfy their *libido dominandi*, do not hesitate to inflict pain to maintain their control of others. The "picture" of the world from which men seek guidance can also bind them, lead them to disaster: all, blind or not, are *"dolientes en la oscuridad"* (*Crossing*, 293). He makes a final distinction between the "real" and the ephemeral: "Because what can be touched falls into dust there can be no mistaking these things for the real. At best they are only tracings of where the real has been. . . . Perhaps they are no more than obstacles to be negotiated in the ultimate sightlessness of the world" (*Crossing*, 294). Here's such a coil! Appearances are not only false, they lead man to disaster. Mankind is blind, whether he had his eyes sucked out by a German Huertista or not. Life is an exercise in futility in which those who make common cause with evil can impose their will upon the herd of men. Having sat through this recital, Billy and his dog light out again searching for Boyd.

Learning that Boyd is dead, Billy sets out to dig up his corpse and return it to New Mexico. One morning he awakes from sleeping on the ground to find a man sitting on a horse, watching him. The man speaks of death, says it is "the condition of existence and life but an emanation thereof," that life is a walking toward death, all life's moments linked one to the next leading there, pulled perhaps by death's predestining power. Billy, inured to this philosophizing bent, replies that a life is a life and could not be anything other than what it is. After the man calls Boyd's Mexican girlfriend a whore, Billy rides on. This moment seems to be a discussion about the ineluctability of the shape of a life, of each person's witting or unwitting cooperation with his own death. Life is a journey toward death which is true reality. At least part of this is echoed later by a Yaqui named Quijada who knows all about Boyd's death. He suggests Billy leave his brother where he is. After all, places are only names we give them. Boyd, having spent his life

marching resolutely to his death, has at least picked that place in the world where he "is supposed to be," which is "a piece of luck not to be despised" (*Crossing*, 387-388).

A last shamanic meeting comes after Billy has been attacked while transporting Boyd's cadaver, his horse shot and badly wounded. A quarter of gypsies come along with the wreckage of an old bi-plane on a truck. While the horse suffers, Billy hears three tales from the gypsies, all versions of "what is this plane all about?" In each case, narrated with agonizing deliberation and punctuated by ominous pauses, "reality" is something different. The gypsy declares that life's ambiguities, represented by the plane (one of two which crashed in 1915 and have lain rotting in the mountains ever since), are "one more twist in the warp of the world," shows that no story about the airplane is "true" (*Crossing*, 405). There finally can be no "truth" about the past because the world is "made new every day" while men cling only to the husks of history. The past is "an argument between counterclaimants" (*Crossing*, 414), all images from the past are idols, heresies. Does the past have meaning? We *are* our past, we *are* our journey; we are like time—fugitive, inscrutable, pitiless. After this cheery conversation, the gypsies save the horse's life, and Billy eventually makes his way back to New Mexico. Lucky guy.

It would be foolhardy to say that the attempts at deciphering above are water-tight. The language in these wayside meetings is often perversely obscure, and McCarthy's habit of doing without punctuation when it suits him does not help. Yet without holding the texts too long under the jeweler's glass, it becomes apparent that these chance meetings along the road are, first, important to the author—he spends so much time on them, dresses them up so outlandishly—and, second, when taken together they are a *pot pourri* of more or less sophisticated rumination on Life's Big Questions—the kind of things sophomores in Philosophy 101 stay up late nights arguing with one another. If McCarthy has these things on his mind, even though the episodes are intrusive, he is within his right to include them.

Life's Big Questions have been considered in novels before. A number of scholars have pondered McCarthy's "vision" of life; they usually conclude that it is ultimately undiscoverable, though it is characterized by abnegation of any hope of understanding God or his purposes, "the knowledge of the doom of all human intention" (Hass, 5):

> McCarthy's metaphysical assumptions are existential. Human consciousness of the past exists within each person in memories and contacts, held in an ongoing meaning by individuals as fragments, subject to loss as memory dims and subject to arbitrary changes without order or meaning. What underlies and transcends personal reality is the natural world.
>
> (Richey, 140)

If, now, a writer spends narrative space airing large philosophical matters—not an easy task—it is fair to assume such cogitations will then affect the development of the narrative and the characters. When Tom Jones hears the Man of the Hill's tale, he rejects the old codger's misanthropy and engages him in a short debate on human nature, re

flecting his own sanguine attitude. Before he hears the story of the Grand Inquisitor from Ivan, Alyosha is passionately set on finding his brother Dmitri, even at the risk of being absent from Fr. Paissy's death-bed. Yet he becomes so involved in hearing, then refuting, Ivan's tale that he completely forgets both those goals. As the brothers part, Alyosha is amazed to find he may not be the person he thought he was. He has new questions about himself. Faulkner's experimental technique of interrupting straightforward narrative with a shattered recollection lets Quentin's guilty remembrance explain why he now stumbles toward suicide. These intrusions are part of the main fabric in which they are embedded.

If the episodes in *Crossing*, foregrounded as they are, had any effect on Billy Parham, McCarthy's inclusion of them would be understandable; but they and all their baggage of philosophical meandering have little to do with the main narrative. If they were all excised and some joining glue put in, you would still have a book. We see no effect of the meetings on Billy. He continues as stubborn, inarticulate, and hapless as ever, and if hearing Life's Big Questions mulled and mauled has given him a philosophy to put up with the horror show his life turns into, McCarthy does not show it.

This raises a question: if the shaman episodes in *The Crossing* have little to do with the narrative and do not materially affect Billy Parham, then why are they there? Are they there to embody McCarthy's "vision" of Mexico? Are they *tranches de vie*, vignettes of the way things really happen in Mexico? Are such encounters with Felliniesque oracles likely to befall a traveler in Mexico? Even the most delusional adherent to the image of a D.H. Lawrence-inspired Mexico where mystery hangs thick in the air learns after brief exposure that Mexico is full of people going about their business and not in the last given to holing up in abandoned churches to waylay passers-by with extended disquisitions on the meaning of life or the role of story-tellers. Even sixty years ago, youth suspects, it was the same. McCarthy does not mean *that.* But if not that, then *what?*

Taken together, the subject matter deployed in these episodes makes up a fairly decent compendium of Life's Big Questions, especially those about God and his ways with men, man's response to God or his perceived absence, the difficulty of communication among men and their confusion about life and its meaning—plus a side trip here and there into the nature of narrative, which may or not be a Big Question, depending on your point of view. With the exception of the last item, these questions engine a big percentage of literature; indeed literature is one of the ways a culture—or a writer—tries to preserve spiritual history, the struggle with the perceived yet unknowable. One can hardly name a major figure in world literature who has not wrestled many a night with those dark angels. Is this what McCarthy is up to? Having come to that point in life where he, like Longfellow, hears above him "on the autumnal blast / The cataract of Death far thundering from the heights," is McCarthy looking for a place to write himself through to clarity on—certainly not a vision of Mexico, but something far more encompassing—his *vision*, his philosophy of life itself?

He has been up to this before. His earlier novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) is lipfull of such rumination, but even though the book is both historically punctilious *and* thoroughly surreal, the line of thought running through the declarations of Judge Holden and others also runs right through *them.* As he talks and talks and talks, Holden defines himself, and in the end, though there is plenty left to ambiguity, the reader at least has the notion that, albeit a monster, Holden is entirely consistent with what he says. What he says is not pretty, and scholars are hard put to accept that McCarthy really means what he puts in the Judge's mouth, although John Beck's piece in this volume says he means *precisely* what he says. It is not therefore surprising to find McCarthy once more rummaging around in this philosophical grab-bag. It is also fair to assume that he still means what he says.

If, then, the fifteen percent of the novel dedicated to philosophizing is a genuine attempt to sort out an encompassing philosophy of virtually all experience, is it appropriately incorporated into the novel? Quite obviously not. Neither do these moments represent any Mexico that ever was or shall be, nor do they materially intersect Billy Parham's development in the enveloping action. One is forced to the conclusion that the episodes are a body of discourse quite apart from the narrative, something McCarthy had on his chest that he needed to get off. You might say, he just *wanted* to say that! The quality of the deposit that this need leaves in the novel is open to question, however. Written with more than even McCarthy's usual *churrigueresco* artisanship, these episodes bring the reader *very* close to the writer. There is—at least for this reader—a sense that McCarthy is showing his cards here, is giving you a glimpse of what he has figured out about life and God and man and story-telling, has let down his guard, wittingly or unwittingly—and probably wittingly.

And there is nothing wrong with that—except why on earth did he dump it all off on Mexico? It just does not fit. The Mexico he shows, aside from being entirely recognizable in terms of geography, is no Mexico you could likely ever find, not in the relatively near past of the 1930s, not ever. Perhaps Russia, with its tradition of wandering *staritsi*, could provide a setting in which such episodes would be plausible, although the problem would remain of their relation to the main narrative. But not Mexico. It just does not work. (The novel would have been considerably improved if all this material had been left out. More than one casual reader has reported to this writer that, after enjoying *Horses* tremendously, he bogged down in *Crossing's* portentous, philosophizing excursions and never finished the book.) Onto a story set in a Mexican landscape, McCarthy has grafted a body of discourse which purports to be Mexican but which is in fact pure and unadulterated McCarthy: "There are no real characters in *The Crossing* other than the landscape and the author's mind" (Merkin.2). This is regrettable, since it takes what is essentially a ripping good yarn, albeit implausible on its face, quite suitable perhaps as juvenile literature, and asks it to carry the burden of the author's need to deal with his own devils. This no only deforms the novel, but

it also does a disservice to Mexico.

One reviewer has said that for McCarthy Mexico is "a theological black hole where young Americans come into contact with death and antiquity and the prospect of annihilation" (Iyer, 224). Others have recognized that McCarthy's Mexico in the trilogy, while entirely realistic in terms of place and name, hill and dale., is a kind of playground where little gringo boys can ride in a raise the kind of Cain they cannot raise any more in Texas or New Mexico, a stage upon which they strut and fret quasi-heroically for their hour, then leave (if they survive) to return to "reality" in the United States, wiser but sadder young men. The fact is that McCarthy uses Mexico shamelessly to run out adolescent fantasies and suggests that Mexico is a place where such behavior is not only acceptable but even admirable. Time after time, when John Grady Cole or Billy Parham have "passed through" some Mexican scene, the people they leave behind feel that simply because the splendid young *americano* has passed their way, for them the world has been changed. The young hero's departure wrenches something from them. McCarthy takes all this too seriously for it to be accidental. Is it possible that he in fact sees Mexico this way? On its face, such an assumption is simply not believable.

Rather the conclusion which forces itself upon this reader is that McCarthy has no "vision" of Mexico at all. Even though he pontificates (vie the prolix, tedious "Dueña Alfonsina) about the meaning of the Revolution in *Horses*, though he treats us to page after page of "Mexicans" philosophizing in *Crossing,* though he has the pimp Eduardo pronounces a death sentence upon the United States and its "pale empire" (*Cities*, 253), the unavoidable fact is that McCarthy is not looking at Mexico seriously. He finds it useful as a setting for stories of youthful rebellion: Mexico's 150-year-old animosity toward the *país vecino al norte*, plus the stereotypical American perception that Mexico is a place where no rules apply and time—actual and historical—is a will-o'-the-wisp, add up to a setting where somebody with misbehavior in mind might repair, whether it be chasing nooky in boys' town honkytonks or slicing up the guts of a hired assassin in a Saltillo calaboose. Whatever is the case, as a vision of Mexico, it is not in the least attractive—or at least it *should not* be.

It is *not* a vision of Mexico, though, because McCarthy is not looking at Mexico, at least not past its surface. What in the end fascinates him is Cormac McCarthy, and in *The Crossing* the intimacies he shares with the reader in those shamanic passages have nothing whatever to do with Mexico—but everything to do with the writer.

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A fuller bibliography may be had at the website of the McCarthy Society, www.cormacmccarthy.com

Materialism and the Function of Women in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

Kelly Gerald

In his 1988 preface to *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Vereen Bell writes: "[McCarthy's] novels are scarcely read, even in Tennessee, his more-or-less native state. He is a meticulous, unhurried craftsman and yet declines flatly to promote his own work . . . "[1] For preserving McCarthy's texts and continuing to make them available to readers, Bell credits the efforts of Daniel Halpern and the Ecco Press, and Random House. In contrast to these efforts in keeping his works from obscurity, the author is presented as a man disinterested by the issue of marketability or the income-generating potential of his work: "McCarthy [. . .] having no other profession and earning virtually no income from his novels, remains committed to writing well and therefore patiently, aided intermittently by foundation support. . ."[2] Edwin Arnold and Dianne Luce also remark upon the disparity between the literary value of McCarthy's fiction and the limited market for it when in their 1993 introduction to *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* they cite Robert Coles 1974 review of *Child of God* from the *New Yorker*. Of McCarthy, Coles observes: "[He] might easily have obtained a fortune with [*Child of God*], but he was not intent upon a psychiatrist's best-seller, and one begins to wonder whether he must reach many Americans. . ."[3] It seems until the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* that McCarthy was, as Bell phrased it: "the best unknown famous writer."[4] But since the overwhelming popular reception of *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole's observation of McCarthy from 1974 no longer bears that poignant quality of truth. While it may still be true that the author abstains from promoting himself or his work, there has been a dramatic shift in the commercial interest in McCarthy. In his book on Cormac McCarthy for the Twayne series, Robert Jarrett gives a brief publishing history of *All the Pretty Horses*, noting its quick rise to best-seller status and seven printings in the first two months after its publication.[5] Upon sketching similarities in setting and form between the novels of the Border Trilogy and *Blood Meridian* Jarrett asks: "Why did the novels of the trilogy suddenly find a popular reception largely denied to *Blood Meridian*?"[6] Part of the answer Jarrett offers is a description of McCarthy's entry into the genre of the historical romance and the popular readership for this form of literature. At the most essential level, the Border Trilogy is markedly distinct from its precursor *Blood Meridian* in this regard: McCarthy's addition of romance to his historical revisioning of the West and the relative commercial

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success of the trilogy. The growth of a popular readership for McCarthy beginning with *All the Pretty Horses* has come to represent a potential for economic and artistic expansion into visual media. With the reports that *All the Pretty Horses*[7] and *Blood Meridian*[8] will become films, it seems more evident that commercial interest in McCarthy will continue to shape the impression of his work. McCarthy has reached, after long delay, the crossroads of art and commercialism, and any dialogue concerning the varying material issues related to the Border Trilogy and its precursor novel must also shift to include wider territory and new players.

I believe it is appropriate to discuss the Border Trilogy in the context of this relatively recent development in McCarthy's career since the commercial success of *All the Pretty Horses* aptly reflects something of my interest in the ethical and material significance of border crossing in the Trilogy. This consideration does not, of course, mark the principle terrain. The Border Trilogy was written in a decade plagued by NAFTA hysteria, by the duplicitous anxiety concerning Mexican immigration and the demonstrated need and acceptance of Mexico as a source for labor and by the discursive economics of the "war on drugs." The national obsession with what is crossing the border and efforts to grapple with what those border-crossings mean continue to define Mexico and things Mexican as the location of economic and moral contention, volatility and ambiguity as these specters continue to surface and fade in the discourse of our popular media. Yet, there is nothing strikingly contemporary about any of this.

Border fictions of every genre in American literature are a vital part of the way the country has defined itself since the first seventeenth-century plantation tracts were composed to lure entrepreneurial minded settlers to the Americas. Within the conventions of historical romance, following the tradition of William Gilmore Simms and James Fenimore Cooper, the border territories that define the frontier have been the setting for political, libidinal and cross-cultural tension–but in advance of this consideration, the frontier, defined by territorial borders and the promise of what is beyond those known demarcations, is regarded as that place where the strictures of known governance are suspended and the world may be turned according to the individual will; it is an open prospect for exploitation and for the hope of self-betterment through the accumulation wealth, whatever form that might take. The Western United States as frontier has been largely defined in terms of economic function, and not only by the popular Western fantasy [the micro-economy of the Saloon replete with games of chance, prostitutes and other consumable goods; the economies of tangential freedom represented by the independent trapper/trader and the cowboy; the allure and the consolations of property, the modest homestead or great Hacienda, her lords and chattels] but also by the mythic-historical memory of the nation upon which such fictions are built.

The place of women in this fictional economy is the subject of concern for me as the Western is a genre long-known for its discursiveness in approaching women as it notably pushes all things feminine to the margins of what it por

tends to be about: masculine activity. Yet, it is the absence of women or the artificiality of women in the Western, which speaks volumes about the masculine fear of and vulnerability to the feminine. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, Jane Tompkins writes that the genre seeks to serve male fantasies and that most Westerns are "about men's fear of losing their mastery and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents."[9] John G. Cawelti in *The Six-Gun Mystique* also responds to the portrayal of women in the Western when he claims that these characters fall in to predictable categories: the nurturing and civilizing influence of the schoolmom, the mother, the cook and the laundress; or the seductive femme fatale or whore who represents the desirability and the peril of retaining ties to the wilderness.[10] Cawelti notes that the homestead is a feminine domain, which offers "love, domesticity, and order as well as the opportunity for personal achievement and the creation of family, but it requires the repression of spontaneous passion and the curtailment of masculine honor and camaraderies of wilderness life."[11] In his book *Loaded Fictions: Social Critique in the Twentieth-Century Western*; Scott Emmert observes that female characters in the traditional Western are, as a rule, superfluous. He writes: "Take the token love scene out of most oaters, and the plot remains largely unchanged."[12] In the case of the Border Trilogy, the pursuit of women and a man's actions in relation to women describe a unifying pattern in the moral fabric of these novels. McCarthy operates with the predictable discursiveness of the Western genre while problematizing this characteristic approach to the feminine. While it is certainly true that there are no female characters that equal in development to Billy Parham or John Grady Cole, remove the women from these books and what is left of the plot folds into the masculine solipsism of *Blood Meridian*.

While any feminine presence in *Blood Meridian* is effectively erased, denied or otherwise pushed off the page, women in the Border Trilogy do have a presence, but it is a presence defined along many currents by their material function. Their intermittent status as possessions most keenly focus the concern for the nature and meaning of possession itself. The presence of women or the pursuit of women, the need for women and the places and conditions defined by their absence continually question, test, cross, reassess the economic boundaries of personal ethics and emboss the Mexican-American border crossings of the novel upon the political and sexual boundaries between men and women, a dialectics of submission and domination in which Mexico, to borrow the language of Edward Said, becomes the origination of an effectively orientalized, inscrutable "otherness" which cannot be incorporated or understood and is drained of its authority in the language of the material: "There ain't shit down there"[13] or "She aint worth it. None of 'em are."[14]

What I propose in this essay is not only a way of regarding the tangential, discursive position of women in the Border Trilogy, but an assessment of why and how women read masculine fictions which deny the significance of the feminine, eliminate its presence,

create it as nameless as Boyd's girl, and attempts to define the lines of gender and property with frequent and uneasy border crossings.

When Rawlins asks John Grady if he has "eyes for the spread,"[15] John Grady grapples for the second time in *All the Pretty Horses* with access to property through women; in the first, it is his mother who owns the ranch, which he regards as his birthright. Not only is patrilineal descent broken by her, but John Grady's patrimony is forfeit by his parents' divorce prior to his grandfather's death and by his status as a minor. When John Grady visits his mothers' attorney, he learns for good measure that it is not only his mother's desire for independence which has disinherited him, but the inability of the ranch to produce: "If it was a payin proposition that'd be one thing. But it aint."[16] When John Grady follows his mother to San Antonio, he must pay to see her in a theater. Access to property which he regards as rightfully his own is controlled by his mother, and ultimately, access to his mother is determined by the price of a theater ticket.

While the disposition of John Grady's mother and his limited engagement with her resonates with her significance, it is Alejandra's great aunt who is given the space to speak directly about the material position of women. She speaks to John Grady as a marriage broker and explains her refusal of John Grady's case as a suitor. When she describes her niece's life, it is in the terms of a gamble–she says "I can only put all my chips forward"[17] and repeats that she understands what Alejandra cannot–that for a woman, there is nothing to loose, but only what she stands to gain in marriage since a woman's value and potential are determined by the men who possess her. As she recounts the events of her life in terms of her relationships with men, she reminds John Grady that she is speaking as a woman dispossess by society, an old maid without father or husband to define her or facilitate her social intercourse. She makes it clear that she does not want Alejandra to have the "conventional"[18] marriage that society has determined for her, but what exactly does she mean by conventional? And what are the social constraints? In an earlier passage from her conversation with John Grady, she explains: "The societies to which I have been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women. Society is very important in Mexico. Where women do not even have the vote."[19] If it is possible for her to prevent it, the old woman will not have Alejandra become the product of this machine. In the paragraph following her reference to the social machinery that limits women's lives, she traces the origin of her thought to a metaphor her father used to describe the relationship of fate and responsibility as relative to the decisions of individuals. The metaphor her father used is of a coiner working in a mint forcing impressions onto blank metal slugs and thus assigning them value.[20] Yet, the principle reason she rejects John Grady's suit is her perception of his passivity: "I know your case. Your case is that certain things happened over which you had no control. But it's no case. I've no sympathy with people to whom things happen."[21] This kind of passivity is especially dangerous as it is precisely the sort of condition that keeps the social machinery for the restraint and denial

of women in motion. She makes it clear to John Grady that it is not his relative poverty or lack of social position, or the question of his criminal actions that prevent him from being a viable suitor for Alejandra.[22] It is less clear, however, that John Grady understands or accepts this. When he leaves Alejandra's aunt, his relationship to Alejandra and the prospect for their marriage is considered and judged again at length when he discusses his circumstances with a group of children. It seems that even these young advisors are capable of understanding the hopelessness of his situation, that in the absence of the father's permission, the cooperation of women and access to money control the borders of any marriage prospect. This is the description of marriage brokering the children offer as insight into John Grady's situation:

> The older girls said that if his novia truly loved him she would marry him no matter what but the boy was not so encouraging and he said that even in families of the rich a girl could not go against the wishes of her father. The girl said that the grandmother must be consulted because she was very important in these matters and that he must take her presents and try to win her to his side for without her help little could be expected. She said that all the world knew this to be true. John Grady nodded at the wisdom of this but he said that he had already given offense where the grandmother was concerned and could not depend upon her assistance.[23]

The comical aspect of these and related exchanges seems to be that John Grady has every appearance of seriously weighing the advice these children offer. And the clear consensus is that so long as the suitor has the love of his novia and the support of her grandmother, and he has money to guarantee his position or offer the appropriate bribes, he is secure in his pursuits. But if he lacks these, there is nothing to negotiate and no bargain can be struck. Again John Grady faces the impasse: acquisition of property is determined by access to and control of women; access to women is determined by access to property of one's own.

Even *corridos* giving popular voice to the concerns of border-crossers acknowledge the commutation of romantic desire and material prosperity. "Micaela" is one such ballad, which expresses this mixed desire for a "*mica*," which in the content of the song refers to an INS card[24]: "*Tú eres mi Mica, Mica, mi Micaela. Tú representas todo lo que mí alma anhela. Esas Visicitudes que es han enseñado por mi pasado las resolveré si estás a mi lado.*"[25] Although John Grady regards the border from a different perspective, the sentiment of the *corrido* is the same for him. It expresses the hope that through marriage the immigrant might secure the privileges of residency. In the case of Billy Parham and his she-wolf, the cross-border migrations test again the limits of property and feminine identity in the context of another failed romance with a Mexican woman.

The brief male-female partnership Billy and the wolf represent in *The Crossing* trips upon the ambiguities of the wolf's status as property and the issue of ownership. When Billy first be

gins to track the wolf, his purpose in doing so is defined in economic terms. Primarily it is undertaken to prevent her from destroying the livestock, and secondly, there is the question of collecting a bounty for her, which Billy briefly considers. After he captures the wolf, however, Billy's relationship to his "contraband" is rather unusual.[26] He does not kill her, but muzzles and ties her to allow limited freedom of movement but only with his control. Within the perimeters of the tenuous domination he establishes, Billy protects the wolf, has her wounds tended, refuses repeatedly to sell her, and his actions violate the economic expectations implicit in his situation. When he meets a man on the road immediately after he has captured the wolf, Billy tries to explain: "I didn't want to leave her cause they'd been some vaqueros takin their dinner over yonder and I figured they'd probably shoot her so I just decided to take her on home with me."[27] The response he receives to this is, of course: "Have you always been crazy?"[28] Billy's companionship with the wolf moves far beyond his sense of responsibility for her life. McCarthy offers this description of an unconventional intimacy:

> [Billy Parham] and the wolf between them ate the whole bird and then they sat by the fire side by side. The wolf snubbed up close to the rope, staring and quivering at every small eruption among the coals. When he touched her skin ran and quivered under his hand like a horse's. He talked to her about his life but it didn't seem to rest her fears. After a while he sang to her.[29]

Billy provides for her and protects her, touches her and talks to her about his life, and sings to her, and does not betray her to the covetousness of other men, yet keeps her carefully tethered to allow for her brief migration among the civilized. Billy's treatment of the wolf seems to be an apt description of any relationship he might have with a human woman. When he and the wolf cross into Mexico, however, the wolf is regarded as his possession in the strictest sense and is confiscated. He attempts to explain his situation by repeating that "the wolf had been entrusted to his care but that it was not his wolf,"[30] and in doing so Billy tries to draw a line between the understanding *possession* as an act and the understanding of *possession* as a state of being. After she is confiscated, the wolf enters immediately into a system of economic exploitation. She is shown as an exhibit in a sideshow to paying customers and is afterward staked in a pit and bated by dogs as a spectacle for an all male audience. When Billy tries to reclaim the wolf, he is threatened at gunpoint. Rather than be forced to surrender her to the ownership and use of other men, Billy shoots the wolf himself, and offers his gun in trade to prevent her hide from being removed and sold.

The similarity between the fate of the wolf and that of the prostitute Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain* is beneficial to note when reading women in terms of their economic function. What Magdalena's pimp, Eduardo, says to Billy in *Cities of the Plain* can be translated with ease against Billy's memory of the wolf. Eduardo explains his position regarding Magdalena and John

Grady:

> [E]verything that has come to pass has been the result of your friend's coveting of another man's property and his willful determination to covet that property to his own use without regard for the consequences. But of course this does not make the consequence go away. Does it? And now I find you before me breathless and half wild having wrecked my place of business and maimed my help. And having almost certainly colluded in enticing away one of the girls in my charge in a manner that has led to her death.[31]

In *Cities of the Plain*, as in the previous two novels of the Trilogy, the pursuit of women, the question of ownership, their status as property to be exploited by social conventions, the bargains that are made in their exchange between prostitution or marriage are the problems which shift among the other ambiguities of the border, the paranoia and hegemony bound to the desire for economic exploitation that violating or restricting the border implies. *City of the Plain* begins in a house of prostitution with the evaluation of women as commodities, replete with jokes rating quantity as quality: "value per pound on a dollar basis."[32] Later when John Grady seeks the help of a cab driver in searching the various houses, he is told that "in a healthy society choice should always be the prerogative of the buyer."[33] It appears not to be uncommon that the buyer is potentially a husband: "Sometimes these girls is get married."[34] Not finding the whore in one place, search another, as if this only represents a lateral move. John Grady is unable to surmount the economic conditions for access to women established in *All the Pretty Horses*. He encounters this difficulty with Magdalena, as with his mother and with Alejandra, and finds his own loss expressed by Mac's failure: "I was too broke for her. Or maybe for her daddy. I don't know."[35] John Grady's inability to compensate Magdalena's pimp, or his refusal to participate in her exploitation, result in her death. Like Billy Parham's wolf, Magdalena does not survive the transaction; her death is the complete erasure of the woman from the novel, the woman about whom all the significant action revolves.

The Border Trilogy's construction of the feminine presence threatens to distort traditional boundaries for understanding the importance of the feminine to the Western, and it does so by linking judgments about ethical conduct to the acquisition of material goods and the acquisition of material goods to the acquisition of women. It is the old Kantian proposition–whether a person, a woman, has been treated as a means to some end or as end in herself–which places the issue of women and their status as commodities at the center of masculine activity in the Trilogy and makes them important to the coherence of the three novels as a single artistic effort. Yet, I must confess that the moment I feel my argument has succeeded, I am pulled back across the threshold I thought I'd safely crossed. McCarthy's Border Trilogy also operates with the predictable discursiveness of the genre where por-

trayals of women are concerned. No matter my protestations, the women of the Border Trilogy remain the stock in trade of the peripheral feminine world of the Western. They are the prostitutes and old women, the loves left behind or the half-remembered dead, or they are simply the hands that bring food to the table. The Trilogy principally remains a masculine territory. Boyd's girl does not have a name. Billy Parham's beloved is not a human woman, and resistance to reading any significance into the gender of the wolf enjoys the obvious disclaimer that "a wolf [is] a wolf."[36] Although his mother's sale of the ranch provokes John Grady's flight into Mexico, the woman's presence is cursory. Alejandra, the virgin of the *Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción*, and the prostitute Magdalena are iconic and predictable stereotypes with hardly enough literary flesh to meet human dimensions.

Navigating the discursive undertow of McCarthy's Border Trilogy is a daunting approach, and I certainly expect to meet opposition concerning the value of reading so far against current. With the presence of women minimized and their importance denied or only marginally addressed, attempts to bring the feminine forward in texts where women's experience is hardly fore grounded must be called to account. What importance is there in efforts to read for women's issues in a fictional domain so overtly masculine? In a struggle to provide some credible account for my efforts toward establishing a reading sensitive to feminine representation in the Border Trilogy and the meaning of that representation (or under representation), I must examine my motives. Why do I read McCarthy? For that matter, why does *any* woman read McCarthy?

My exploration of the Western novel, and of McCarthy in particular, has been another kind of border crossing, a violation of gender boundaries not inconsequential to my interest in materialist readings of the feminine in the Border Trilogy. Nor is the question of the *how* of feminine self-discovery through engaging masculine experiences and fantasies in literature or other media a dilemma unique to me. Melody Graulich is one among the many voices of women who have studied the literature of the West and has discovered there less a confrontation with an alienating masculine word and more the arena for grappling with a rejection of the female condition as defined by an exploitative and compulsory heterosexuality.

In her essay "Somebody Must Say These Things: An Essay for My Mother," Graulich contextualizes her exploration of feminine self-discovery not with any remembrance of her mother; rather, the genesis of the struggle toward self-realization for the author begins with a description of her relationship to her grandfather and her idealization of the Western hero: "Born in the Badlands of South Dakota, or so he said, my tall, handsome grandfather was a western drifter who rode buffalo, sang songs about a girl named Duckfoot Sue, and was descended from Geronimo–or, on alternate days, Sitting Bull."[37] Graulich claims, and this description substantiates, that her grandfather understood the power of self-definition that is available to an individual through narrative. She accepted her grandfather's self-characterization,

she admired it, indeed, she loved him for it. Her admiration of his independence and individuality generated within her the desire to emulate those values, which she regarded as masculine designations:

> I saw him as a flawed visionary, an outlaw from a seedy, conformist society, a man who would "go to hell" before he'd compromise his values. In my own stories, he became the quintessential American hero. His rebellious, freedom-seeking footsteps led me directly to American studies, and I began a dissertation on male writer and their narrative escapades about the West.[38]

Graulich had early adopted a masculine paradigm of self-made independence and integrity which reflected her own desires for similar self-definition through rejection of social restrictions, a personal investment which predictably resurfaces in her academic attraction with the West, male writers, and narratives defined by male experience. After her grandfather's death, however, Graulich is forced to come to terms with a counter-narrative of her grandfather– her mother's account of the same man from memories of a childhood punctuated by watching her father beat and humiliate her own mother. Graulich recalls that she did not doubt the truth of these incidents, but what was shocking and troubling to her was the inability to sympathize with her grandmother, indeed, to have any feeling for her at all. What Graulich realizes and must grapple with is the alienation from women's experience resulting from her own male-identified ego, and she discovers that this is not a profile unique to her and certainly not an issue unrelated to the way women read westerns or why women read masculine literature at all. In a later essay, "Violence Against Women in Literature of the Western Family," Graulich concludes that "the effect of violence on the mothers' lives and how watching a mother become a victim of male aggression affects a daughter's complex identification with and resistance to her mother's life."[39]

Graulich's story is a protoype of what the poet Lynn Sukenick calls matrophobia, In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*; Andrienne Rich adopts the term and adds her own observation to Sukenick's:

> [I]t is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*. Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon here. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely.[40]

Graulich's attraction to masculine texts, masculine narrative and male patterns of self-construction is part of her resistance to the restrictions of the female

condition represented to her in the persons of her mother and grandmother. It is an effort of self-preservation, which resists identification with women's experience in pursuit of the individualism and freedom afforded to men. Building upon Rich's observations regarding the politics of compulsory heterosexuality, Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* clarifies her fundamental purpose is to "show how the exclusion of women from the central category of the 'individual' has been given social and legal expression."[41] In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich systematically lists, categorizes, and defines the ways masculine power is derived from the exploitation of women in a closed heterosexual society. Men "command or exploit [women's] labor to control their produce" primarily by means of marriage or prostitution.[42] Women are physically confined[43] or used "as objects in male transactions."[44] Male pursuits are defined "as more valuable than female within any culture, so that cultural values become the embodiment of male subjectivity."[45] Rich concludes that the exertion of force used to contain women disguises the male fear that "women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional–therefore economic–access to women *only* on women's terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix."[46] This is a fear that might be justified in the case of John Grady's relationships with his mother and Alejandra. Though in the case of Magdalena, access on her own terms is clearly the antithesis of prostitution.

If the preference for masculine-identity for women readers like Graulich, or more accurately the virtues represented by masculinity, is actually an issue of resistance to the negative portrayal of women in literature as party to the limitations of freedom and identity for women within conventional heterosexual systems, then the potential for reading the masculine domain in McCarthy's Border Trilogy as a radicalized feminine space might be tested. By identifying with the experience of male characters, a woman reading McCarthy may effectively test the limits of her own acceptance or denial of women's experience. Consider how a shift in perspective along these lines might alter a reading of John Grady's relationship to Magdalena in the proposal scene in *Cities of the Plain* that begins with a long narration accounting for her initiation into prostitution and the accompanying physical abuse which begins when she was sold to the "procurer" for a house called La Espranza del Mundo at the age of thirteen to settle a gambling debt.[47] The litany of violence against her is overwhelming. She seeks refuge in a convent and is sold back to the procurer by the mother superior. Returned to his possession, she is beaten with a whip made from the inner tube of a tire. She runs away again, seeking protection from the police. She is raped by three officers then sold to the other police men, then sold to the prisoners for what few pesos they had or given in trade for cigarettes. When the novelty is exhausted, she is sold back to the procurer who beats her with his fists, slams her against the wall, knocks her down, kicks her, ultimately breaks her arm. It is love enflamed by compassion, which inspires John Grady in the proposal,

which follows fast upon this description. Yet as he embraces her, he places a hand over her mouth to silence her story. The reader of *Cities of the Plain* is invited to recognize and embrace Magdalena's condition through the vehicle of John Grady. Yet, this urge of sympathy reverses its expansive sentiments when the impossibility of Magdalena's extraction from the system of heterosexual exploitation is recognized as futile and ultimately destructive. While Magdalana's experience is at best peripheral to the story, silenced by John Grady, and violently concluded, the rejection of the feminine condition, the fear and resistance to any affective identification with her is satisfied.

Notes

[1]Bell, Vereen M. Introduction. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. By Bell. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988) xv.

[2]Bell xv.

[3]Arnold, Edwin T. and Dianne C. Luce. Introduction. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Eds. Arnold and Luce. (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1993) 3.

[4]Bell xiv.

[5]Jarrett, Robert L. *Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Frank Day. Twayne's United States Authors Ser. 679. (New York: Twayne, 1997) 94.

[6]Jarrett 94.

[7]Film version of *All the Pretty Horses* due for release in summer 2000 from Columbia Pictures and Miramax Films. Producer: Mike Nichols; Executive Producer: Robert Salerno; Director: Billy Bob Thornton. Cast: Matt Damon (John Grady Cole); Henry Thomas (Lacy Rawlins); Lucas Black (Jimmy Blevins); Penelope Cruz (Alejandra). *All the Pretty Horses*. Official site. Sony. 6 Jan. 2000 <http://www.spe.sony.com/movies/jump/prettyhorses.htm>. *All The Pretty Horses* (2000). The Internet Movie Database. 4 July 1999 <http://us.imdb.com>. *All the Pretty Horses*. Upcomingmovies.com. 17 Dec. 1999 <http://upcomingmovies.com/alltheprettyhorses.htm>.

[8]Thus far not much information is available about the prospective film version of *Blood Meridian*. The project has been developed by Tommy Lee Jones, who may direct and star in the picture, and Scott Rudin, producer. Coming Attractions: *Blood Meridian*. Corona Productions. 31 Mar. 1999. <http://www.corona.bc.ca/films/details/bloodmeridian.htm>.

[9]Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 45.

[10]Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique*. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green U, 1984) 48-49.

[11]Cawelti 49.

[12]Emmert, Scott. *Loaded Fictions: Social Critique in the Twentieth-Century Western*. (Moscow, Idaho: U of Idaho Press, 1996) 47.

[13]McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. (New York: Knopf, 1992) 34.

[14]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 10.

[15]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 137-38.

[16]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 17.

[17]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 239-240.

[18]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 240.

[19]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 230.

[20]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 230-231; 241.
[21]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 240.
[22]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 241.
[23]McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 243-244.
[24]Herrera-Sobek, Maria. *"Corridos and Canciones of Mica, Migra,* and *Coyotes*: A Commentary on Undocumented Immigration." *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life.* Eds. Stephen Stern and John Allan Cicala. (Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 1991) 91.
[25]"You are my Mica, Mica, my Micaela. You represent all that my soul desires. Those vicissitudes that have cropped up in my past I shall resolve if you are by my side." De Anda, Guillermo. "Mi Micaela." Profono Internacional, 1981.
[26]McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing.* (New York: Vintage, 1995) 99.
[27]McCarthy, *The Crossing* 59.
[28]McCarthy, *The Crossing* 59.
[29]McCarthy, *The Crossing* 89.
[30]McCarthy, *The Crossing* 90.
[31]McCarthy, Cormac. *Cities of the Plain.* (New York: Knopf, 1998) 240-41.
[32]McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* 5.
[33]McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* 56.
[34]McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* 56.
[35]McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* 186.
[36]McCarthy, *The Crossing* 105.
[37]Graulich, Melody. "Somebody Must Say These Things: An Essay for My Mother." *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism.* Eds. Diane P. Freeman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 1993) 175.
[38]Graulich 175.
[39]Graulich 183.
[40]Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution.* (New York: Norton, 1976) 235.
[41]Pateman, Carole. *The Sexual Contract.* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 1988) 6.
[42]Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose.* Ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. (New York: Norton, 1993) 207.
[43]Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" 208.
[44]Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" 207.
[45]Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" 207.
[46]Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" 212.
[47]McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* 139

Cormac McCarthy and the Literature of American "Filibustery"

Brady Harrison

Because I only have a few moments today, I'd like to situate *Blood Meridian* (1985) in a century-long tradition of American writing: the literature of American mercenaries and filibusters. As anyone who has researched the historical antecedents to *Blood Meridian* knows, the 1850s was the decade of the American soldier of fortune, and mercenaries and provocateurs such as William Walker, John Quitman, Henry Crabb, John O'Sullivan, and others participated in filibustering schemes against Mexico, Cuba, and Central America: Walker failed in his 1853 invasion of Lower California and Sonora, but succeeded (temporarily) in his conquest of Nicaragua (he became "President" of the republic in 1856, only to be forced from the isthmus in 1857)[1]; Quitman unsuccessfully attempted to invade Cuba in 1855; Crabb (a boyhood friend of Walker's) lead an expedition against Sonora in 1857 only to be captured, executed, and his head, John Sepich reminds us, chopped off and preserved for a time in vinegar[2]; O'Sullivan tried in 1848 to persuade James Polk to purchase Cuba from Spain, and later raised money, arms, and men for Narcisco Lopez's missions against the "Pearl of the Antilles" in the early 1850s.[3] These variously successful ventures in turn have inspired a number of narrative treatments.

If we look at the literature of American mercenaries and filibustery from the 1860s to the present, we can judge that it stands as one of the favored literary vehicles for the exploration of the American imperial self.[4] Blood Meridian, one of the most brilliant and brutal tales of American freebooters, stands as a culmination of this tradition: read against the first narratives in the corpus—and here I will take as my example Richard Harding Davis' pre-Spanish-American War bestseller, *Soldiers of Fortune* (1897)—it maps the fall of the imperial self in American literature from stylish swashbuckler to stinking, blood-soaked baby-killer.

By the "imperial self" in American literature I mean not only representations of the official instruments of empire—policy architects, diplomats, military strategists and advisors, and CIA agents—but also the more clandestine, unofficial, and even illegal agents who, while they may lack the imprimatur of the state, nonetheless serve the interests of U.S. political, economic, and military expansionism: banana kings, arms traffickers, and filibusters from William Walker to Oliver North. Although the phrase, "The American Imperial Self," might seem to conjure a grand and heroic figure—we might expect such a self

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to be a colossus, a masterful, poised, and dignified self engaged in a benevolent, yet firm mission to help lesser beings and nations—the imperial self is anyone who advances U.S. interests, who exerts any form of American technological or economic power, who makes others wary or fearful of the U.S., or who communicates in word or deed an a *priori* conviction of the superiority of American culture, commerce, politics, or belief systems.

The literature of American mercenaries and filibustery—writers in this long tradition include Bret Harte, Richard Harding Davis, Gore Vidal, Darwin Teilhet, Peter Matthiessen, Robert Houston, Philip Caputo, and Robert Stone, to name only a few—has served as a favored vehicle for exploration of U.S. imperialism and the American imperial self in part because the figure of the mercenary (the *not-us*, *not-me*, the disavowable) positions the reader—variously—in a libidinal or ideologically involute relationship with the history of the *imperium*. On the one hand, in early texts in the tradition, the freebooter serves as a projection of desire, as a literary expression of an individual and cultural longing for empire. The swashbuckling hero of Davis' dream of conquest fulfills both his male and female readership's fantasy of effortless annexation, of wresting Cuba and other territories from Spain or the other European powers. On the other hand, McCarthy's post-Vietnam tale of filibusters and scalp-hunters in the 1850s places the reader in a rather different libidinal relationship with the semi-official agents of empire. As the *imperium* has aged and its history has been revealed, the imperial self in the literature has fallen further and further into violence and despair, and we can less easily celebrate—at least in polite company—either the empire or its agents. At the same time—and as I will suggest below—the question of libidinal projection in *Blood Meridian* remains a curious matter.

Although the literature of filibustery gets its start in the unlikely form of that most vicious agent of empire, Ralph Waldo Emerson—in a February 7th, 1844 lecture read in Boston before the Mercantile Library Association, "The Young American," the Bard of Concord, deploying a phrase that evidently cheered men such as John O'Sullivan, George Sanders, and Walt Whitman, suggested that where the "official government" fails to act, America must rely upon "the increasing disposition of private adventurers to assume its fallen functions"(225); the speech, in turn, gave its name to the "Young America" movement of annexationists—although, as I say, the literature of filibustery gets its start in Emerson, the most famous nineteenth-century tale of an American freebooter must be Davis' *Soldiers of Fortune*. A bestseller the year it appeared, it had such an impact that a recent Davis biographer, Arthur Lubow, can make the rather surprising claim that "*Soldiers* was so widely read that, in some unquantifiable way, it doubtless helped prime the national psyche for the collective adventure in Cuba"(124).

The romance follows the adventures of Robert Clay, an American mercenary-turned engineer in Olancho, an imaginary South American republic. As the manager of a U.S.-owned iron mine, the American self must defend U.S. interests against a brewing coup; Clay (the son of an unnamed Walker-Quitman fig-

ure who died a filibuster against Cuba) effortlessly orchestrates a counter-coup (he seems never to break a sweat), and as U.S. marines land to protect American lives and property, he remarks, "I guess I am the Dictator of Olancho"(333). The creation of an overseas empire, Davis tell his readers, will be an easy matter for the American colossus: we'll impose order upon the corrupt, lazy, and technologically backward Latin American, and we'll look good doing it.

As Amy Kaplan puts it in "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s"(1990), "swashbuckling romances about knights errant offer a cognitive and libidinal map of U.S. geo-politics during the shift from continental conquest to overseas empire"(661). The romance fulfills its readers' longings for an *imperium*, and not only answers the male reader's desire for political and sexual triumph—Clay takes the country and then the mine owner's daughter—but also positions the female reader (most of Davis' readers were women and he was famous to them as the model for the male escort to the Gibson Girl) as the "jingoistic" spectator to masculine derring-do; as Kaplan remarks, "by circulating imperial adventures into the American home, [novels such as *Soldiers*] incorporate domestic space into [the] imperial network "(677). Davis' mercenary tale acts as dream work, as the sexualized projection of imperial desire; the tale of freebooting, from its popular inception, works to position its reader relative to the political debates of its day: it asks them to identify with the hero and to share in the yearning for empire.

If Davis invites the reader to imagine a new world order, McCarthy—writing after the fall of Saigon, after Watergate, after Jimmy Carter and the hostages in Teheran—presents a rather more brutal portrait of imperial violence. Where Clay would have his readers wish for the casual eruption of violence, McCarthy re-presents the history of Westward expansionism and portrays the imperial self as an agent of the metaphysics of Indian-hating and the vicious colonial tropes of appropriation and negation.[5] Even as the general trajectory of the empire has been upward—the U.S., after all, did win the Cold War, and after the military set-back in Southeast Asia has not lost much time re-establishing its power around the world—the imperial self in American literature has become Captain White, Glanton, the kid, and the judge, murderous freaks murderously adrift in "a howling wilderness"(42). The literature of American mercenaries and filibusters, taken collectively, dramatizes the ethical ruin of empire-building and explores the tension between the genuine discourses of American altruism and beneficence—Emerson called on Young Americans (armed with a sense of generosity and gentleness) to lead the leaders of the world, and Clay thinks he's doing the Olanchoans a favor—and the desire to take the land, resources, and even the lives of others.

To conclude, I'd like to return to the question of libidinal projection in *Blood Meridian*. Although the novel fits John McClure's definition of the "late imperial romance"—it excoriates imperialism even as it describes a descent into heterotopian realms of "strangeness and enchantment"(9)—I would classify the

work as late modernist and suggest that it most decidedly does not offer the pleasures of a romance. True, we're taken into exotic realms—but they're realms of the underworld—and we're not offered a vision of transcendence or spiritual redemption; Robert Stone's agnostic vision in, say, *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981) seems almost genial in comparison. Still, we might ask why we like the novel and why some—myself included—see it as McCarthy's masterpiece? We admire the language, the judge weirds us out, and we might even assign it a political theme that we can live with: say something like; it presents empire building as a vicious process, one that we might wish to decry.[6] Still, although White, Glanton, and the kid (our chimera of hope) die, the judge triumphs. An early reviewer of Robert Stone's *A Hall of Mirrors* (1966) lamented that the theme of the novel seemed to be, "despair and die" (cited in Bonetti 95); with that in mind, we might say that the theme of *Blood Meridian* must be really *despair* and *die*, *War*—the epigraphs, the novel, and the epilogue assure us—is the permanent condition of humankind: to take the novel seriously is to fall into realms of unredeemable, thanatotic despair.

Notes

[1]In 1860, Walker raised another filibuster army against Central America and sailed for the isthmus with the hope of reconquering Nicaragua. Ever the opportunist, he chose not to land in Nicaragua but instead became involved in a dispute over the Bay Islands off Honduras; he went where he thought he had the best chance of pursuing his dream of an isthmian empire. The Honduran army soon captured the freebooter and executed him on September 12, 1860.

[2]See John Sepich's Notes on *Blood Meridian* (Louisville: Bellarmine College Press, 1993) 25.

[3]For a much fuller treatment of American filibustery, see Charles H. Brown's excellent study, *Agents of Manifest Destiny* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

[4]I take this phrase, of course, from Quentin Anderson's seminal work, *The Imperial Self* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971). Where Anderson explores the imperial "consciousness" of Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, and James, I'm interested not only in the imperial mind, but also in the imperial deeds of adventurers such as Walker, Quitman, Roosevelt, North, and others.

[5]The phrase, "The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating" comes from Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971) 124-31. Richard Drinnon, in his pioneering study of the literatures of American continental expansionism and overseas adventurism, *Facing West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), adapts the locution as his subtitle: "The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building." For more on the colonial tropes of appropriation and negation, see David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

[6]I have made such an argument myself ("'That immense and blood slaked waste': Negation in Blood Meridian," *Southwestern American Literature* 25.1 [1999]: 35-42), but here revise that too happy reading of the novel.

Cormac McCarthy's Appropriation of Texas Literary Space in *All the Pretty Horses*

Don Graham

Although there is a considerable body of commentary on the influences of canonical American authors on the fiction of Cormac McCarthy—including traces of Melville, Faulkner, Stephen Crane, and Hemingway, among others—the whole question of McCarthy as a Texas writer remains largely unexamined. Most of the writers from West Texas will only grudgingly if at all grant McCarthy the lofty status of "Texas writer." In his recent book *The Fifty+ Best Books on Texas,* A.C. Greene refuses McCarthy admittance to his puny pantheon on the grounds that *All the Pretty Horses* is "largely a novel of Mexico," which is exactly like saying Henry James's *The American* is largely a novel of France.

McCarthy himself has been as silent on the subject of Texas writers as he has been on most subjects. In the oft-cited *New York Times* interview, McCarthy revealed a generic interest in the region: "I've always been interested in the Southwest. There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West." But he said nothing about Texas writers. It is my contention that in *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy positioned himself not only within a Western context, as has been discussed by numerous critics, but also within an as yet unacknowledged Texas context. In this paper I shall discuss *All the Pretty Horses* in relation to the two best known Texas writers to deal with West Texas: preeminently Larry McMurtry and, secondarily, Elmer Kelton. McCarthy's novel shares some interesting affinities with McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By*, and it reinscribes Texas history in and around Elmer Kelton's San Angelo. It seems obvious to me that McCarthy's "novel of Mexico" is also, quite stunningly, a novel of Texas.

Early in *All the Pretty Horses* McCarthy encapsulates the history of the West in three short paragraphs of great economy and eloquence:

The original ranch was twenty-three hundred acres out of the old Meusebach survey of the Fisher-Miller grant, the original house a one-room hovel of sticks and wattle. That was in eighteen sixty-six. In that same year the first cattle were driven through what was still Bexar County and across the north end of the ranch and on to Fort Sumner and Denver. Five years later his great-grandfather sent six hundred steers over that same trail and with the money he built the house and by then the ranch was already eighteen thousand acres. In eighteen eighty-three they ran the first barbed wire. By eighty-six the buffalo were gone. That same winter a bad die-

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up. In eighty-nine Fort Concho was disbanded.

(pp.6-7)

The topics enumerated here—founding of a ranch, cattle drives, the coming of barbed wire, the slaughter of the buffalo, the famous winter when all the cattle froze to death, and the closing of a frontier fort—all of these are subjects about which writers like Elmer Kelton and scores of Western authors from Zane Grey to Benjamin Capps have written novels. And lately, McMurtry himself. Anybody setting out to write traditional historical novels of the West could use the paragraph as a checklist of topics to construct stories around.

McCarthy's novel begins of course in Kelton country: San Angelo, Texas. Many of Kelton's Texas novels—he has written no other kind—take place in the area around San Angelo. Like most Texas Anglo writers, Kelton never goes beyond the Anglo viewpoint, never strays south of the border. With a few exceptions, Texas writers, on the whole, have been strangely uninterested in Mexico. The exceptions are Katherine Anne Porter and J. Frank Dobie. And later, Tom Lea. The writers I am discussing today, Kelton and McMurtry, are the two best known Texas novelists dealing with ranching culture and Western history played out in Texas, and their interest in Mexico, for the most part, seems limited at best. Yet in one of Kelton's novels, *The Good Old Boys*, published in 1978, there is a moment near the end that sounds a distinctly McCarthyesque note. Kelton's hero, the aging Hewey Callaway, is on the verge of getting married when his old pal Snort Yarnell shows up with an enticement Hewey can't refuse. The time is 1906, and both old cowboys know that things are changing fast, that a world is disappearing. Snort is going to Mexico, and he wants Hewey to go with him. Snort paints a pretty picture of Mexico that might appeal to the boys in McCarthy's novel:

> It ain't just on that penny-ante border, Hewey. It's way down yonder, way down deep. Beautiful country. Not spoiled like this country's gettin' to be, but big and wild and wide open. It's like Texas was before they commenced puttin' fences across it and cuttin' it up for farmin'. It's like goin' back to when we was young. I think me and you ought to see that just one more time, while there's still a little of it left.
>
> (p.250). 1978.

A study of influences is a study of what one writer learns from his predecessors. I do not think that there is anything that Cormac McCarthy could learn from Elmer Kelton. But it is interesting that of the West Texas towns that McCarthy could have selected, it is Kelton's San Angelo that he did select. As if to claim that place once and for all.

The Texas novel that has the most affinities with *All the Pretty Horses* is Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By*. Set in 1954, *Horseman, Pass By* deals with the end of the West, of the West as it used to be. Lonnie, the seventeen year old narrator, has a profound respect for his grandfather, Homer Bannon, who is eighty-four and whose experience goes all the way back to the days of the cattle drives. The old rancher has retained from that era two old longhorns as a reminder of the un-

fenced West. In the rancherly ethos of this novel, land and cattle are the central values, and the oil industry represents a rapacious assault on the land by the elimination of ritual and stewardship for the sake of greed and quick gain.

The old loyalty to land and the ranching ethos gives way to newfangledness. In his longest speech in the novel, Homer declaims:

> There'll be no holes punched in this land while I'm here. They ain't gonna come in an' grade no roads, so the wind can blow me away.... What good's oil to me. What can I do with it? With a bunch a fuckin' oil wells. I can't ride out ever day an' prowl amongst 'em, like I can my cattle. I can't breed 'em or tend 'em or rope 'em or chase 'em or nothin.' I can't feel a smidgen a pride in 'em, cause they ain't none a my doing.'
>
> (p.)

But the old man's sense of tradition has no successor except in the elegiac remembrance of his grandson. There is no middle generation to act upon the Grandfather's wishes. Lonnie is virtually orphaned, having lost both of his parents somewhat mysteriously. The book's open-ended "Epilogue" finds Lonnie hitchhiking to nearby Wichita Falls to see a friend injured in a recent rodeo accident. What lies next for Lonnie is never spelled out.

One thing is pretty certain, though. Lonnie won't be doing anything heroic on horseback. For Lonnie is at best an indifferent cowboy and once, when asked whether he owns any horses, he says he has three, "all of them no-count" (p.). In McMurtry's novel the mode is realist irony, and neither Lonnie nor anybody else has a shred of mysticism about horses. Lonnie does wax lyrical about the land on occasion, and he admires his grandfather so much that he pays tribute to him in this retrospective narrative with a title borrowed from Yeats' "Under Ben Bulben": "Cast a cold eye, on life, on death, Horseman, pass by." It seems apparent that the sensitive Lonnie, in the unnarrated logic of the narrative situation, will go to college and major in English and write, retrospectively, of the horseman that has passed. Or he might hitchhike all the way to San Francisco and hang out at the City Lights Bookstore and become a Beatnik. But the one thing we know he's not going to do is get on a good horse and ride to Mexico and go to work as a mystical horse breaker on a fine hacienda.

In *Horseman, Pass By* there is only a trace of Mexico. The cattle infected with foot and mouth disease were purchased in Mexico, and so in this work Mexico is tainted, a site of contamination. As in the rest of McMurtry's work, Mexico is a vast unknown. McMurtry's characters rarely cross the Rio Grande. In his third novel, *The Last Picture Show*, the two adolescents, Sonny Crawford and Duane Moore, take an obligatory trip to Matamoros to get drunk and get laid, but the Mexico they see is strictly the typical red-light district of a border town. The chapter is richly detailed and suggests authorial knowledge based at least on first-hand observation. In his Western fiction written later, in the 1980s and 90s, his characters never cross the Rio Grande except in the most cursory fashion. Even when the historical facts call for a setting in interior Mexico, McMurtry draws back. In *Dead Man's*

Walk he refashions the well-known incident of the drawing of the black beans, which took place during the disastrous Mier Expedition. McMurtry locates the incident in a village near El Paso rather than in its actual historical site, much farther south and much farther into the interior. In *Comanche Moon*, his last novel about the *Lonesome Dove* duo, some action takes place in Mexico, perhaps a result of McCarthy's presence in McMurtry country. But all in all, compared to McCarthy, McMurtry's interest in Mexico seems not to extend beyond the Number 5 Dinner at the average Tex-Mex restaurant.

All the Pretty Horses in a sense starts where *Horseman, Pass By* ends. The essential elements are apparent: youthful "orphaned" protagonist, loss of grandfather, and loss of ranch, the need to find a life somewhere else. Both novels celebrate cattle and horse culture beyond all other forms of living. The love of ranching exhibited by McMurtry's old rancher finds its objective correlative in the the language of *All the Pretty Horses*:

> But there were two things they agreed upon wholly and that were never spoken and that was that God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man.
>
> (p.)

There is also in each novel a strong feeling that a way of life has ended.

John Grady Cole's position at the novel's beginning is very similar to Lonnie's. Respectful of his grandfather and of the ranching ethos, John Grady also mourns the end of an era. His grandfather was a man out of the old rock, as Dobie might say. The boy admires him for many reasons, not the least of which is that the old man never gave up on John Grady's father during the years the father was held in a prison camp in World War II.

John Grady too is "orphaned." His dying father and his mother don't even tell him of their divorce decree. The middle generation in this novel is most fully represented by John Grady's mother, whom his father has to caution John Grady not to refer to as "she." Following the grandfather's burial, a lawyer tries to explain to John Grady why the boy's mother might not be interested in ranching: "Son, not everbody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and going to heaven. She dont want to live out there, that's all."

John Grady sees his mother for the last time in San Antonio (where he hitchhikes to and which he thinks may be in a different time zone from San Angelo) and attends a play in which his mother "came through a door onstage and began talking to a woman in a chair." To put it mildly, he does not find in his mother's activity anything of value: "He'd the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing in it at all." John Grady's visit to the Menger Hotel marks the end of his interest in his mother, when he sees her on the arms of a stranger and discovers that she is not registered in her own name. At this point the mother disappears from John Grady's consciousness. In the prison at Saltillo John Grady thinks of his father, but he never thinks of his mother.

There is in both McCarthy and

McMurtry an acute sense that Texas in the postwar years is moving away from its old frontier, land-centered values. John Grady's father, in his last words to his son, reinforces the feeling that the landscape of his son's desire is located some place other than Texas, than America: the last thing his father said was that the country would never be the same.

> People don't feel safe no more, he said. We're like the Comanches were two hundred years ago. We dont know what's going to show up here come daylight. We don't even know what color they'll be.
>
> (p.)

Ultimately, of course, John Grady Cole and Lonnie Bannon are very different characters, far more unlike than they are similar. Lonnie's hunger for experience, for example, leads him away from ranching culture towards, probably, some kind of urban experience. In the novel he longs to visit cities like Fort Worth where there is a level of excitement missing in the lonely ranching country of his birthplace. With all of his sexual longings Lonnie is much closer to Holden Caulfield than he is to John Grady Cole. In McMurtry's novel the Old West is dead, and the Modern, unromantic West triumphant.

In McCarthy, the Old West in Texas is dead but rediscoverable—and in grander terms—in Old Mexico. John Grady rides into a world of horsemen and high adventure, and Lonnie Bannon rides into Wichita Falls. That about says it all. John Grady reminds us of a knight, a Parsifal of the plains, while Lonnie Bannon reminds us of ourselves.

McCarthy's fiction has always plumbed metaphysical dimensions, while McMurtry's never has. McCarthy's fiction belongs in the line of the American tradition that Richard Chase famously defined as the Romance, while McMurtry's fiction points in the direction of a social world where comedy, not tragedy, predominates. Between the two of them, they have produced the most significant fiction we have about West Texas—and Mexico.

Revisioning Cormac McCarthy's Existentialism.

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This paper aims to sketch the impact of existential thinking upon McCarthy's deployment of literary form as his style has developed across the "southern" and "western" novels. For the most part I will be concerned with the formal continuity that may be traced between the existential *tour de force* of *Suttree* and the "internal" stylings of the *Border Trilogy* novels, by which I mean specifically the aesthetic and structural relation of *Cities of the Plain* to *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. But it should also be said from the outset that the problem of form will be addressed in a quite specific way.

The ideas offered here will have little to do with the legacy of New Criticism that continues to dominate at least one wing of McCarthy scholarship, just as I will have little interest in pursuing McCarthy's existentialism as exist-entialism alone. Rather, what I would like to suggest about the existential in McCarthy's writing follows broadly from what I take to be John Beck's call, elsewhere in this collection, for a new kind of reading of McCarthy's fiction. In his article "'It wasn't the future that brought me back here': Borderline Nostalgia and Global Impact," Beck suggests that McCarthy's writing, like all writing, is ultimately limited by its own historicity, by its own moment of production within the broader set of social, political and economic problems which govern the literary imagination in any given period. And to this extent I would have to agree with him that *Blood Meridian*, for example, is a novel which tells us just as much about Reaganomics and Thatcherism as it does about nineteenth century Manifest Destiny or the metaphysics of human evil.

Having said that, it is also important to remember that the Reagan/Thatcher administrations were themselves the product of a deeper set of problems confronting the bourgeois democracies of the west, as the so-called golden age of capitalism, the long boom of the 1950s and 1960s, gave way first of all to the slumps of the mid 1970s and early 1980s, and thence to the distinctive brand of neo-Keynesian demand management (masquerading as *laissez-faire*) of the Reagan and Thatcher years. The tax-cutting of the 80s and the diversion of state welfare expenditure back into military spending were in part an attempt to re-stimulate at the legislative level the rising levels of consumer demand which had underpinned the post-war regime of capital accumulation referred to by economists and historians as the era of Fordism. According to the influential critic of Fordist economics, the "Regulation

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School" economist Michel Aglietta, the period between 1940 and 1975 had seen the implementation and vigorous state regulation of what he calls a new "consumption norm" (Aglietta 159-60), a prodigious extension of commodity relations into areas of human life where such relations were previously an absent or at least a contingent influence upon individual and social being. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have put it, the dynamic consequence of post-war Fordism "was to transform society into a vast market in which new 'needs' were ceaselessly created. . .in which more and more of the products of human labour were turned into commodities," and in which "the logic of capitalist accumulation penetrated into increasingly numerous spheres" (Laclau and Mouffe161). It is in this context that I would like to suggest an alternative way of reading the existential in McCarthy's fiction, an issue that has provoked a range of illuminating readings by what we can now perhaps call the 'first wave' of McCarthy criticism, none of which has yet made the broader move of accounting for this aspect of the novels in terms of McCarthy's own historical location.[1]

One way of historicizing these issues would be to draw upon the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, who defines the existential condition in his early work as the domination of intrinsically free human consciousness by the world of material things and material needs in which consciousness is set down. In the later Sartre of *Search for a Method* and the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, this existential entrapment of human being within matter, within facticity, within what he calls the *inertia* of things, is redefined as the product of a specific set of historical and social relations—the capitalist mode of production itself—which turn the object world into the enemy of human freedom. So that when Sartre describes existence as a dialectical struggle between what he calls human praxis (or the human energy that transforms matter) and matter which then re-imposes itself back upon human praxis, he is not talking about the world in some abstract or merely fetishistic sense. Sartre's world, where human subjects must constantly compete for access to the means of subsistence or luxury, and where human labor-power is itself a commodity to be bought and sold,[2] is always in his later thinking a world that is administered and reproduced in the interests of a particular social and economic class. But it is also a world where the very capacity of human praxis to penetrate and mediate the existential inertia of matter constantly shows us the fragility of those bourgeois social regulations, which regulate the production, and consumption of material things in our time.[3] By politicizing the existential in McCarthy along Sartrean lines, I would therefore like to argue that the novels may be read not simply as historical symptoms of the Fordist and post-Fordist world in which they get made, but also as a series of interventions in that world, a series of statements that mediate aesthetically the existential entrapment of human energies which they report back to us. Taken collectively, in other words, McCarthy's writings might then be described as a kind of existential (and political) praxis in their own right.

Given more time I would like to

have said something here about *Child of God*, which looks to me like the novel where such issues begin emerging with clarity in McCarthy's fiction. But it is with *Suttree*, as a number of critics have suggested, that the problem of existentialism's relation to the broader material world is first given real cohesion and shape. Set down as a human presence among the rotting detritus of the commodity form which dominates the urban landscapes of Knoxville—rusted tins, the carcasses of automobiles, mountains of garbage, old tires, bricks, broken jars, sun crazed rubber toys—like the "young girl's body buried under trash down by First Creek" (416) Suttree himself is presented to us in classically Sartrean form as a subjectivity colonised by the inertia of matter, the self as one more object or commodity in a world penetrated everywhere by the objectifying logic of bourgeois exchange. Midway through the novel, we find Suttree

> Oaring his way lightly through the rain among these curiosa [where] he felt little more than yet another artifact leached out of the earth and washed along . . .Suttree among the leavings like a mote in the floor of a beaker, come summer a bit of matter stunned and drying in the curing mud, the terra damnata of the city's dead alchemy (306).

As D.S. Butterworth has suggested, here Suttree is imaged as a factic thing. "[L]ike all the other flotsam of culture and nature," he is "largely indistinguishable from the other stuff in the river" (Butterworth 98), one object among others, one more "bit of matter" in a world where human energy is arrested, or "stunned" as McCarthy puts it, by the inertia of physical things.

Grasped in such Sartrean terms the commodity landscapes of Knoxville might then be read as the material source for those death visions which haunt the protagonist throughout the novel, and which have traditionally attracted the attention of those critics who evaluate the novel for its existential content. At Gatlinburg, where Suttree hears the footsteps of the dead,

> He scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care. He lay on his back in the gravel, the earth's core sucking his bones, a moment's giddy vertigo with this illusion of falling outward through blue and windy space, over the offside of the planet, hurtling through the high thin cirrus (286).

In the case of the death vision, as in the case of the commodity landscape, the existential fate of the self is to be immersed in a realm where the lines dividing human being from a world of animate and inanimate objects become blurred. In the vision at Gatlinburg all experience slides into a condition of homogeneous undifferentiation, a condition of stasis where the transformative energy of human being (the quality that renders human praxis possible) becomes neutralized in the inertia of matter: Suttree's "being" melding with the stuff of the world, the earth's core sucking at his bones. We might say that Suttree's death visions and the existential loss of self which accompany them are the ideological concomitant of life lived within the

"dead alchemy" of the commodity landscape, where people themselves are bits of matter stunned and drying, and where human life is always liable to that moment of existential slippage when existence will be figuratively buried under mountains of trash. In a Fordist world, where experience is objectified on all fronts by the unprecedented extension of exchange value into all areas of human life, the ideological corollary of this would be the death vision, with its premonition of praxis emptied out into inertia, or of transformative human energies colonized by what Sartre calls the "nauseating" homogeneity of all things as matter pure and simple.

But I am not at all sure that Butterworth is right when he suggests that McCarthy treats his characters in *Suttree* merely as "material ephemera," wholly unable (as he puts it) "to rise above the materiality of their circumstances" (Butterworth 96). If anything the novel is surely remarkable for the lengths McCarthy goes to in rescuing his protagonist from the existential inertia in which he seems trapped. Indeed, if Suttree's much quoted "obsession with uniqueness [that] troubled all his dreams" (113) connotes an existential commitment to the irreducible subject-self, that commitment is also played out at a deeper structural level of the writing where aesthetic form, and language itself, emerge as sites of Sartrean praxis or of existential resistance to the dictatorship of commodity-matter charted at plot level.

One way in which literary form goes to work against this domination of human relations by matter might be observed in McCarthy's tendency to switch the point of view, quite abruptly at times, between the omniscience of a third person narrator who charts Suttree's embeddedness in the commodity landscape, and the heightened sensory apparatus of the protagonist as it responds to the object world and inscribes it with subjective meaning. In those scenes where the point of view shifts decisively in this way, between the protagonist as narrated object and the protagonist as active participant in the action, the antagonism between the object world and human consciousness is made explicitly dialectical, such that the sensory response of the subject to the world around him, relayed to the reader in minute detail, transfigures the meaning of the scene as initially given.

One of the more straightforward instances of this occurs in the scene where Suttree takes his fish to Market Street.

> Market Street on Monday morning, Knoxville Tennessee. In this year nineteen fifty-one. Suttree with his parcel of fish going past the rows of derelict trucks piled with produce and flowers. . .Past hardware stores and meat markets and little tobacco shops. . . He crossed the street, stepping gutters clogged with green stuff. Coming from behind the trucks a beggar lady's splotched and marcid arm barred his way, a palsied claw that gibbered at his chest. He slid past. Stale nun-like smell of her clothes, dry flesh within. The old almstress's eyes floated by in a mist of bitterness but he had nothing

but his fish. (66-7)

Here, and in the scene as a whole, when the protagonist is viewed by the narrator he becomes an object among other objects in the marketplace (both figuratively, since Suttree is described merely as one factic thing among a superabundance of others on show, but also literally, since we are told he brings "nothing but his fish," nothing but his own objectified labour as fisherman, to market). But in those parts of the scene where the point of view shifts and becomes that of the protagonist himself—where, for example, the beggarlady the narrator describes coming from behind the truck is converted into "stale nun-like smell of her clothes, dry flesh within"—the entrapment of the subjective human presence within an object world it cannot mediate but can only pass through is revised and then presented back to the reader in more fluid form. Throughout the market scene Suttree's point of view registers everything around him with a heightened precision, his interiorising of the market (particularly by sense of smell) stressing the return of a human physicality distinct from the realm of objects in which it is embedded. We might say that the writing works hard at re-establishing the human as an agent inserted into the commodity-world, a human presence to which that world is now forced to answer. In this scene the writing registers everything Suttree looks upon at least twice, and frequently more than twice, moving from the object observed in its inert facticity to the object interiorised and mediated by the protagonist's gaze, to the object thus presented back to the reader in a new and modified state. The "atmosphere" is described as "rank with country commerce" and is then further described as "a reek of farmgoods," but is also "a light surmise of putrefaction and decay" (66); a "strong smell of feed" is also "like working mash" (66); "flower ladies" are "like cowled gnomes," but they are also like "driftwood" (66); the "splotched and marcid arm" of the beggarlady is also "a palsied claw" (66); a man on the skate cart is like a "half man," while the skate cart itself is like a boat in its "oaring"; fans are "huge," and they are also "slow" (67); children are described as "small," "streaked," "milling," "turning" and "shuffling." (67). Humanity itself is "maimed," "goitered," "twisted," "tubered," "rheumed," "vacuous," "dour" and "diminutive." (67). As Suttree moves among the piles of produce heaped all around him in the marketplace, the pressing weight of commodity-matter in the scene is confronted by an observing consciousness that interiorises the world of objects (including human objects) and mediates that world subjectively at every turn, reaffirming what Sartre calls the "specificity of the human act" (*Search for a Method*, 91), retrieving the protagonist as agent from within the crushing weight of material things. If matter appears before the reader in *Suttree* as a monumental presence that dwarfs the lives of the characters, the protagonist's existential gaze is written in language that asserts the fragility of that object world, effecting what Sartre would call an existential "going beyond" of the inertia in which matter traps human praxis.

We can also note that this "going beyond" is reinforced in the market

scene by the intrusion of that wonderfully sonorous language I presume McCarthy takes from Faulkner and Melville: "marcid," "lazaret," "goitered," "tubered," "electuaries," "decocted," "truncate," "beeves," "cambreled," "blueflocced" (66-7); a proliferation of words whose meanings are not immediately transparent, but which seem instead to fall onto the page as the residue of an older—or the anticipation of an "other"—order of things, a world that remains potential, but as yet unrealised, within what is extant. Putting this again in more conventionally Sartrean language, we could say that McCarthy's writing in the market scene itself becomes an existential praxis which constantly re-penetrates the inertia that would bury its protagonist, its prose, and its reader beneath that figurative mountain of trash. In the existential gaze of the character, and in the arcane phrasing of the narration that frames it, the commodity world is robbed of its "naturalness," its inevitability or its permanence, and slides away instead into something other than itself in the language on the page. *Suttree*'s existentialism may then be grasped on one level as a collection of aesthetic forms which respond to and mediate what a more orthodox marxian position than Sartre's might call the *ideology* of Fordist accumulation: the assumption that capital in its now global phase represents the only viable, rational, or "natural" way of organizing our material life.

The same thing may be said in rather different ways of the *Border Trilogy* novels. Here the commodifying of those "wish-objects"—horses, wolves, landscape, women—by which the protagonists invoke a more "natural," "less capitalized" West (Jarrett 115, 117) identifies the market overtly as the final arbiter of the existential inertia from which the protagonists seek release. By the time we get to *Cities of the Plain*, moreover, John Grady's failure to mediate or revoke the commodity status of the prostitute Magdalena, coupled with the violent death of both characters, brings about what looks like a final catastrophic penetration of human praxis in the fictive world by the colonising logic of commodity-matter.

As in *Suttree*, however, in *Cities of the Plain* this hegemony of the commodity at plot level again seems resisted at the more or less subliminal level of literary form, where the *Trilogy* now seems to abandon all attempts to maintain itself as a unified aesthetic "whole." In all kinds of ways *Cities of the Plain* is certainly very different from *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. The climactic violence of the knife-fight with Eduardo seems absurdly stylized, a balletic performance that contrasts with McCarthy's more usually sanguine aestheticizing of death. The pastiching of character discussed by Jarrett (98-9) now seems developed to such a point that "character" itself only exists as a mythic or entropic thing, even as the preponderance of dialogue in the novel (which stresses the very presence of the protagonists as "characters") now closes down the rich descriptive prose of the earlier volumes. At first sight the epilogue, too, seems overly mannered, too self-consciously disjuncted from the main body of the novel. The most glaring disjunction that *Cities of the*

Plain stages with its own fictive past in the previous volumes, however, lies in the withdrawal of the Mexico previously defined (by the protagonists) as an "authentic" realm, a space in which some generalized transcendence of the commodified north American order might be sought. Indeed perhaps the most striking thing about the *Trilogy* is its shifting definitions of Mexico and Mexican-ness and its juxtaposition of these alternative definitions around the axis of the Second World War (the moment at which Aglietta tells us the new mode of capital accumulation is inaugurated and the moment at which McCarthy repeatedly tells us the old West is finally lost). As I have suggested elsewhere the formal awkwardness of the *Trilogy* novels when they are considered *as* a trilogy, the very odd ways in which *Cities of the Plain* differs from the earlier volumes, may lie primarily in the novel's erasing of a putative Mexican "otherness" by the market; "the way in which Mexico, previously conceived of by Billy Parham and John Grady Cole as a place of sanctuary, an atavistic or primal space beyond the material logic of exchange-value, suddenly fills up, almost as it were overnight, with a superabundance of commodities and acts of exchange-value of all different kinds" (Holloway, REF TO FOLLOW).

What might we conclude from this suggestion that the *Border Trilogy* actively subverts its own formal unity, its own moment of "closure" *as* a trilogy? And what, more specifically, are we to make of these juxtaposed Mexico's in the context of McCarthy's existentialism and the possibility that his writing might itself be grasped as a kind of Sartrean praxis, a mediation of commodity-matter carried out at the aesthetic level of literary form? It seems to me that the formal jarring of these two worlds in the *Trilogy* novels, the sudden switching of alternative worlds as we are shown one Mexico in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* and then all of a sudden shown another Mexico in *Cities of the Plain*, does rather more than simply undermine the reductive, essentializing perspectives to which McCarthy's *Trilogy* protagonists are occasionally prone. Written in the 1990s, at the end of an era where Aglietta's new consumption norm has become normative on a more or less global basis, where the market itself now appears to many as an organic second skin, the repository of some abstract and universal human nature, the awkward formal relationship between *Cities of the Plain* and the earlier *Trilogy* texts emphasises instead the very constructedness of the commodity universe it details to us. In a sense we could almost say that the formal arrangement of the *Trilogy*, the way in which the two possible Mexico's are juxtaposed side by side, accomplishes at the aesthetic level what John Grady is unable to accomplish at the level of plot; with literary form, as in *Suttree*, effecting an existential praxis of some kind, a simulated shrugging off of commodity relations, and a de-naturalizing of exchange value itself. In *Cities of the Plain*, in other words, the sheer arbitrariness of the market, the suddenness with which commodity relations have magically penetrated all social relations in the fictive world, turns the market itself into an alien thing imposed from "without," and thus a paradoxically

far less monolithic presence than it is in *All the Pretty Horses* or *The Crossing*.

It should of course be stressed that this is a reading of McCarthy, rather than an attempt to attribute some kind of authorial intent (or authorial politics) to the novels. If McCarthy's writing does display any overt anxiety about the relationship between "culture" and the wider economic world in which "culture" is framed, it surely manifests itself less in any concrete political agenda than it does in a quite self-conscious affiliation to the traditions of modernism in which twentieth century existentialism is embedded: a point already well documented, I think, in the many comparisons drawn between McCarthy on one hand, and Melville, Faulkner, Hemingway and Nietzsche on the other.

Notes

[1] On the existential in McCarthy's fiction see: Bell, Vereen M. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1988: 33, 84, 122; Longley, John Lewis, Jr. "*Suttree* and the Metaphysics of Death." *The Southern Literary Journal* 1 (1985): 79-90; Prather, William. "Absurd Reasoning in an Existential World: A Consideration of Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*" *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Edited by Wade Hall and Rick Wallach. El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995: 103-114; Shelton, Frank W. "*Suttree* and Suicide". *Southern Quarterly* 29 (1990): 71-83.

[2] A world, as McCarthy puts it in *Blood Meridian*, where a "strange equality" prevails between human and non-human objects, a world where "a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships" (247).

[3] "If one wants to grant to Marxist thought its full complexity, one would have to say that man in a period of exploitation is at once both the product of his own product and a historical agent who can under no circumstances be taken as a product. . . . [I]t is not true that History appears to us as an entirely alien force. Each day with our own hands we make it something other than what we believe we are making it, and History, backfiring, makes us other than we believe ourselves to be" (Sartre, *Search for a Method* 87, 90). "At each instant", Sartre suggests, "we experience material reality as a threat against our life, as a resistance to our work, as a limit to our knowing". But we also experience it as "an instrumentality already revealed or possible" (*Critique* 247), as a thing upon which purposeful human activity ("praxis") can then go to work.

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"It wasn't the future that brought me back here."

Borderline Nostalgia and Global Impact

"What joins men together [.] is not the sharing of bread but the sharing of enemies." BM 307.

John Beck

Blood Meridian, published in 1985, will take its place in literary history as an important contribution to the debate over the difficulty of ascribing significance to America's military heritage. Whether or not McCarthy intended his novel to take up a position in the culture wars, it is hard not to see the text as involved in the contest of meaning over the appropriate manner of reading and remembering the racial and imperial wars of the recent and more distant past. Conflicts over the correct designation of such historic sites as the Alamo and Little Big Horn during the 1980s reveal the longevity of racial and political allegiances in the West as well as the deeply entrenched divisions between interest groups undiminished by over a century of cultural change. Such cultural battlegrounds as these also expose much about both the shifting status of previously unrecognized social groups, like Mexican and Native Americans, for example, and about the anxieties of the guardians of official culture which these challenges to accepted meaning never fail to elicit.

McCarthy's novel entered American cultural discourse at a significantly reactionary moment, the year of the film *Rambo*, admired by the same president who regarded the Contra rebels as "the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers." The previous year the Republican Party had aligned itself with the religious right, in effect sanctioning the counter insurgency of fundamentalist values which, along with monetarist economic policies, sought to reconstitute not just American political culture, but everyday life in America along the lines of so-called traditional principles.

This tradition, of course, could never be described as a timeless American culture of enduring and identifiable values and practices. It was, in fact, a culture constructed largely during the 1940s and 50s and based on the miniaturization of economic and social life made necessary by World War II and the subsequent Cold War. Threats to national security invariably foster the elaboration of myths of internal cohesion and shared purpose, myths which, by the early 80s, remained in tatters after the humiliations of Vietnam and Watergate. From the point of view of the ascendant right, we might add to these disasters the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation, rising militancy among students, Hispanics, Native Americans, and various other manifestations of treasonous pinko ideology.

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In order to roll back the catastrophes of the 60s and 70s, to regain the lost values of "tradition," the conditions for these values had to be reestablished, so it comes as no surprise that Reagan's spending priority (his only real commitment to spending at all) was, from the outset, defense. In dollar terms, the defense budget almost doubled between 1979 and 1983; even taking inflation into account the increase was still nearly one third, the fastest growth in peacetime defense spending since the eve of Pearl Harbor.[1]

Nostalgia for the grandeur of a proud and confident recent past was no mere whimsy for a nation which, during the mid-1980s, slid from being the world's greatest creditor to being its greatest debtor, from having a large trade surplus to carrying a massive deficit, and from being the world's richest nation in per capita terms to one challenged by several Western European nations and Japan.[2]

Infused with the mystical apocalyptic rhetoric of the religious Right, and clutching to the straw man of 80s Soviet Communism as a continued demonic threat to democracy, the short termism of Reagan and his Western military-industrial backers and beneficiaries was dazzling in its flair for melodrama, yet vacuously sentimental and disastrous for the millions of American it could and would not lower itself to include.

Blood Meridian, I would suggest, is born out of this world, speaks of it, and sometimes, perhaps, even for it. Like the Reagan administration, it might be said to be strong on rhetoric but weak on substance, for while the prose fairly prickles with millennial anticipation and righteous fury, the text harbours a nostalgia for the manly construction of identity through barbarism which can only be redeemed through a libertarian relativist reading which the novel, I believe, refuses to accept.

What I mean is that the kind of relativised, ironised reading performed by those seeking to recover reactionary cultural texts into a liberal discourse of difference and plurality is so easily produced, is such a readily manufactured, professionalised response to troublesome work, that the really troublesome aspects of a text like *Blood Meridian* are safely tucked out of sight.

In *Blood Meridian*, and also, to a far lesser extent, in the Border Trilogy, the fact of human brutality is presented as uncorrupted by any sign of generosity or compassion. Such a Hobbesian dystopia is, of course, not unique in fiction, yet the denial of access to any ethical debate is severely enforced in McCarthy to the extent that doubts about the text's ethical dimension can only take refuge through the appeal to irony. Without the lever of humanism in the text, the reader must ascribe an ethical boundary in some domain outside the text, whether this be the pondering of the text's "true" ethical or political position, the author's "real" intention, or the capacity of the culture to contain such discordant evidence of its own ability to absorb and consume unpleasantness.

But what if the text is what it says it is? What if *Blood Meridian* is a tale of blood and power, a celebration of America's imperial adventure in national consolidation and ethnic cleansing? What if our liberal horror is another's moment of the highest honor? What if the text is truly blind to its own chauvinism, blandly unironic in its sur-

feit of scalps and offal-stained souvenirs of conquest? Is our late 1990s desire for inclusively and openness to the degradations of the past so complete that we cannot countenance the possibility that strategies of literary construction such as pastiche and self-reflexivity might serve purposes other than social and political progressive radicalism? Has the example of modernism taught us nothing?

What makes *Blood Meridian* so powerful is its very refusal to help answer these questions. This may also be what makes it a reactionary book, but it does make it a great book. If it is great it is because it is truly worrying, because it is unflinchingly, unavoidably of its time, reaching toward a fundamentalist universality for the American (read human) experience which reverberates with a nostalgic passion for a world in which, as Barry Goldwater liked to say, "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." This, I think, when we read McCarthy, is what we must face.

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On the boat to Texas at the beginning of *Blood Meridian*, the kid can now be "finally divested of all that he has been" (*BM* 4). His origins and destiny evacuated, he becomes adrift from history, free to roam the existential plains of the primal new world he is reborn into. If there is irony in McCarthy's reinscription of the fable of the American Adam, it is hard to catch, the portentousness of tone the only indication that there might be an absurd imperialist nostalgia behind the observation that not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. (*BM* 4-5).

At times, the narrative reads as indistinguishable from the Judge's own disquisitions on power and fate, "vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung," as Conrad's Marlow says of Kurtz's report for the International Suppression of Savage Customs. "But it was a beautiful piece of writing."[3] Like Kurtz, the Judge would agree that "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded" when faced with a race which regards whites as "supernatural beings [.] With the might of a deity."[4] This might is derived from the ordering of the world made possible by the exercise of reason, as the Judge makes clear:

> That man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (*BM* 199).

For Judge Holden, as for Kurtz, the unrestrained freedom of the so-called wilderness has enabled the will of rational man to flower and realize its imperative, which is to achieve an absolute authority, which "countermands local judgments" (*BM* 198). Unlike Kurtz, however, the Judge is untroubled in his triumph; there is no fallen nobility of purpose, no trace of personal vanity which might present the Judge as a man overtaken by the force of his imperial mission. The Judge just is that force. He is not man turned mad by power; he

is the embodiment of the madness of power itself.

If there will "not again in all the world's turning" be terrain which provides an opportunity for an untrammeled test of man's will, it is because people like Holden got there first. The will has been tested and the stuff of creation has been shaped. The eloquence of Kurtz, and Holden, and Reagan, and McCarthy, is the eloquence of a culture which has taken charge, a discourse of measured metaphysical layering which makes a sonorous and impenetrable beauty from the wreckage of its deeds. It is the sound of a power, which, as Marlow observes, hides "in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of [its] heart."[5]

The youths of the Border Trilogy have inherited the Judge's culture, if not his eloquence, like the kid, "violent children orphaned by war" and left to roam a country which erases the marks of their lives as they pass (*BM* 322). And like Billy Parham and John Grady Cole, McCarthy's prose is more pared down, more chastened than its historical forebear, less willing to hide within the magnificent folds of its own construction. If *Blood Meridian* is the rhetorical high noon of American ambition, the false dawn, which wakes Billy at the end of *The Crossing* marks a final, artificially induced resuscitation of a failed discourse of power.

"Suddenly I felt heat on the side of my head toward the tower, opened my eyes and saw a brilliant yellow-white light all around. The heat and light were as though the sun had just come out with unusual brilliance. [.] A tremendous cloud of smoke was pouring upwards, some parts having brilliant red and yellow colors, like clouds at sunset." This is from an eyewitness account of the Trinity bomb test in July 1945.[6] "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds," said Robert Oppenheimer. Less portentously but perhaps even more to the point was Trinity director Kenneth Bainbridge's remark: "Now," he said, "We are all sons of bitches."

> He woke in the white light of the desert noon [.]. The shadow of the bare wood windowsash stenciled onto the opposite wall began to pale and fade as he watched. As if a cloud were passing over the sun [.]. The road was a pale gray in the light and the light was drawing away along the edges of the world. Small birds had wakened [.] and out on the blacktop bands of tarantulas that had been crossing the road in the dark like land crabs stood frozen [.]. He looked toward the fading light. Darkening shapes of clouds all long the northern rim [.]. yet more dark and darkening still [.] the light was drawing away faster and that noon in which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark [.]. A cold wind was coming off the mountains [.]. Inexplicable darkness [.] after a while [.] the right and god made sun did rise, for all and without distinction. (*C* 425-426).

Set in the middle years of the century, between the Second World War and the first blush of the Cold War, the America of the Border Trilogy is the new global power grasping its role as legis-

lator of life and death. It is America in the image of the Judge, for whom "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak" (*BM* 250). The Trinity test vaporized morality, leaving only the brute historical fact, which, as the Judge points out, "subverts" moral law "at every turn." The Judge's West, the site for the testing of man's will to shape the stuff of creation, has become the crucible of an achieved prophecy, the ferocious power embedded in the very particles of matter now in the charge of the inheritors of the purged landscape of the scalp hunters.

World War II marked the beginning of the political and economic ascendancy of the Western states. Between 1952 and 1992, genuine or honorary Westerners accounted for thirty-one out of forty possible years in the White House: Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and Bush. The emerging power of the West is bound up with federal and military involvement, as the public works projects of the New Deal extended during WWII and after both militarily and in terms of reclamation projects, agricultural subsidies, interstate construction, and maintenance of public lands. The military-industrial complex set up weapons test sites throughout the Southwest, sunk installations into mountains, relocated entire communities and created new ones of scientists and soldiers. Between 1945 and 1960 the population of the West grew from thirty-two to forty-five million.[7] By the decision alone to single out the thread of order, the West has taken charge of the world.

> He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west. He turned south along the old war trail and he rode out to the crest of a low rise and dismounted and dropped the reins and walked out and stood like a man come to the end of something. (*APH* 5)

John Grady Cole is at the end of something. The Grady name is buried with his grandfather and with him a history of adventurous individuals scared only of dying in bed. And with the old man goes the ranch so run down the place "has barely paid expenses for twenty years" (*APH* 15). What John Grady Cole is at the end of is a bloodline, an epoch, a tradition, and a way of life. His parents split after the war. When the father went missing in action, the grandfather was the one who never gave up while the others were 'fixin to give [his] clothes away' (APH 13). The experience changed the father: 'I aint the same as I was. I'd like to think I am. But I aint' (APH 12). It is the mother who disposes of the ranch, effectively going against the bloodline. John Grady Cole is orphaned and disinherited by her and his gambler father. Yet he is persistent, pursuing an antiquated life of chivalric nobility. An increasingly incorporated, bureaucratic United States has closed down the chances for heroically self-defining acts, so the desire for ancient rites of passage is sought in the deeply "foreign" Mexican plains. In doing so, Cole reinstalls himself as a Grady, the name he is known by throughout the trilogy. He has, in effect, doubled back to become his grandfather, to live in a time long past.

Grady's redundancy in the contem-

porary world is marked by his inability to join the army due to an irregular heartbeat. The rhythm of Grady's blood is literally out of kilter, leaving him four-F and nowhere to go. The traces of soldiering are all around, however, and like Johnny who, though he had "fought all over the Pacific theatre [and] had whole companies shot out from under him," never got a scratch, perhaps not fighting bothers Grady, excludes him again from the world of the noble cause, the masculine challenge (*CP* 26). In the opening pages of *All the Pretty Horses*, Grady's father "took out his cigarettes and lit one and put the pack on the table and put his Third Infantry Zippo lighter on top of it and leaned back and smoked and looked at him" (*APH* 7). In *Cities of the Plain*, an identical scene takes place between Troy and Grady: "He lit the cigarette with a Third Infantry Zippo lighter and laid the lighter on top of his cigarettes and blew smoke down along the polished wood and looked at John Grady" (*CP* 6).

The war looms large in many important works of Southwestern fiction produced by the postwar generation, not so much as the site for those fictions but as the source of an irreparable rupture between the past and present. The alienness and sheer horror of the war, of course, is far from peculiar to the people of the Southwest, but the very fact of their geographical and cultural isolation meant that the impact of fighting overseas shook to the very foundations ways of life grounded in a relationship with the land.[8]

The gadget responsible for ending the war in the Pacific was developed in the desert of New Mexico. The apocalyptic terrors of the following years cannot be separated from the fact of the hidden forces cordoned off throughout the Southwestern states. The war doubly shadows the Southwest, first as an alien conflict drawing men to their deaths or spitting them back as broken and traumatized residuum, secondly as the generator of a new world order of bureaucratic secrecy and unflinching state power.

Explaining his decision to commit large-scale forces in Vietnam, LBJ invoked the motto of the Texas Rangers: "Courage is a man who keeps coming on." McCarthy invokes this same heroic tenacity in his youths through the mantra, "they rode on," a defiantly persistent "coming on" in the face of often calamitous circumstances. The nostalgic quest undertaken by Billy Parham, John Grady Cole, and their fellow travelers, for uncorrupted forms of labour and human relationships leads them to criminality, pauperism, and/or death. Despite the tragic power of this pursuit and what it says about the equally pauperized place of idealism in the contemporary world, the desire to make an honorable life within corporate America must also be considered in the light of the cowboy-warrior ideology of the dog-end years of the Cold War. These are books written in the aftermath of the Reagan and Bush presidencies, men who also played out a nostalgia for clear moral positions, for a rugged individualism within a "new world order" disturbingly like the old one, only with the Western rider more firmly planted upon the global nuclear-industrial horse.

Just as Reagan and Bush were generationally out of step with the times and unable to envision a world without an "evil empire" to conquer, so too are

McCarthy's young men adrift in a world they cannot understand, a world of foreclosures, federal takeovers and nuclear tests. Such indications of the wider world haunt the texts even as they occupy marginal positions within them. Billy and John Grady enact, in their easy movement to and fro across the US-Mexico border, the unrestricted, unregulated movement enjoyed by the existential American individualist as world citizen, a movement invested with the sovereign right to free access enjoyed by the economically and politically victorious. Even the most dispossessed of US citizens can move from the status of victimized to that of mythic cowboy once they loose themselves from the federalized containment of the postwar big government West.

In this light, the novels present a celebration of geopolitical fluidity clearly no longer available to inhabitants south of the border. Even in this fictional world, all crossings are undertaken by Anglos, the Mexicans dwelling in some mediaeval never-never land of supernatural and spiritual wonders. No border guards check Billy and John Grady's papers or question their travel plans. There are no spot checks or shakedowns, no customs officials. The unregenerate fantasy space of Old Mexico lies before them with a passive historical vacancy, a land read only through the eyes of, even despite their apparent sympathy for the Mexican way of life, a pair of tourist-adventurers, counterinsurgent forces in Latin America seeking authenticity. The mysterious women, the strange, picturesque peasants and cripples, the proud landowners, the corrupt officials; the occult tonalities of this dark fairy kingdom of good and evil offer Billy and John Grady the whole gamut of dubious pleasures vicariously enjoyed every year by millions of visitors to border towns like Tijuana and Juarez. The very fact of the protagonists' implausible survival of so many tribulations at the hands of the Mexicans signals their status as chosen ones— supernatural beings [.] with the might of [deities]"—a status which reconfigures the sordid deaths of Boyd and John Grady as a form of martyrdom.

Mexico is used by Billy and John Grady as a receptacle for swilling around a mythic American universe vaporized by the bomb, a universe where individuals like those in the Texas Rangers can keep coming on, unwavering in their moral righteousness. It was, in fact, Captain W. J. McDonald that LBJ invoked in 1965, and what McDonald actually said was this: "No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that's in the right and keeps on a'coming." Billy and John Grady seem to carry within them an innate and unreflective ability to judge right from wrong, but an ability strangled and useless in a corporate United States. Mexico offers, in its alterity, the right kind of evil to conquer, and the pimp, during the climactic duel of *Cities of the Plain*, sees straight through John Grady's Anglo fantasy:

> In his dying perhaps the suitor will see that it was his hunger for mysteries that has undone him. Whores. Superstition. Finally death. For that is what has brought you here. That is what you were seeking . . . . That is what has brought you

here and what will always bring you here. [.] [T] he Mexican world is a world of adornment only and underneath it is very plain indeed. While your world [.] totters upon an unspoken labyrinth of questions. And we will devour you, my friend. You and all your pale empire. (*CP* 253).

Notes

[1]*In the Shadow of War*, p. 401.
[2]*In the Shadow of War*, p. 415.
[3]Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 71.
[4]*Ibid.* 72.
[5]*Ibid.* 98
[6]Kenneth Greisen: *Eyewitness account of Trinity shot*, July 21, 1945. Source: U.S. National Archives, Record Group 227, OSRD-S1 Committee, Box 82 folder 6, "Trinity."
[7]*Ibid,* 17
[8]Twenty-five thousand Native Americans served in the forces during WWII, with a further 40,000 moving into off-reservation jobs. *The Oxford History of the American West*, 487. As reported in Southwestern fiction, the story is familiar. The returning GI finds it impossible to recognize his homeland, difficult to reconnect with friends and family, suffers awful nightmares and recurrent recollections of horror. All certainties have gone and all there is left is a broken future, endlessly haunted by the past. This is certainly the tale we read in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1966), Rodolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). For Momaday's Abel, while he can remember everything up to his departure well, it is the recent past, "the intervention of days and years without meaning, of awful calm and collision, time always immediate and confused, that he could not put together in his mind" (*HMD* 25). Abel's return to town has been, he considers, a failure.

> [H] e could not say the things he wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it. And yet it was still there, like memory, in the reach of his hearing [.]. Had he been able to say it, anything of his own language [.] [it] would once again have shown him whole to himself; but he was dumb. Not dumb—silence was the older and better part of custom still—but inarticulate. (*HMD* 57).

Abel ends up a murderer and socially outcast. Similarly, the tortured Lupito in *Bless Me, Ultima*, must be pursued by his own townspeople after his inexplicable murder of the sheriff. "Japanese sol'jer, Japanese sol'jer!' he cried, 'I am wounded. Come help me—"(*BMU* 19), he howls, but despite Narciso's plea that "'You know that the war made him sick'" (*BMU* 20), he is shot dead. "The war-sickness" is recognized in all who return. When Antonio's brothers come home they become dissolute and agitated, wasting their service money in the pool hall. "They were like lost men who went and came and said nothing" (*BMU* 65). Of the three veterans, Leon suffers the most, howling and screaming in the night "like a wild animal" so that his mother has "to go to him and hold him like a baby until he could sleep again" (*BMU* 66).

For Tayo, the young Laguna man in *Ceremony*, the disturbance is much the same:

> He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present [.]. He could feel it inside his skull—the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more. [H] e had to sweat to think of something that wasn't unraveled or tied in knots to the past [.]. (*Ce* 6-7).

"The war changed everything": McCarthy, War, and the Physics of Witness

John Wegner

The economic benefits of World War I and II radically altered certain areas of the American West.[1] U.S. military victories and the subsequent industrial complex that rises transforms the region from an area "fixin to dry up and blow away" and an area ranchers "ought to be glad to get shut off into a multi-billion dollar a year training and testing ground for American service personnel (*Cities* 62).[2]" The increased military presence in the Southwest reflects the country's dependence on technology to create a cleaner and more efficient war machine. However, the economic benefits of war do not match the loss of life and hope that McCarthy infuses into his World War II veterans. Cole's father, probably dying from pneumonia he caught as a p.o.w. on the Bataan Death March or at his stay in "Goshee," returns from war a broken dying man. Troy, after his discharge from the Army, "wandered all over the country" isolated from family and friends (23). As Cole and Parham are talking about their respective trips to Mexico, Billy tells Cole "this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everything. I don't think people even know it yet" (*Cities* 78). What seems changed is the certainty of existence. The man in the epilogue to *Blood Meridian* progresses over the plain "as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie" (337). The development of the Southwest, the fencing in of America seems an effect caused by the violence and bloodshed of the novel. However distasteful, the Mexican/American war, the Civil War, and the Indian Wars (to mention a few) increased American expansion. To the American public, there seemed a cause and effect relationship that rationalized and justified killing. World War II offers no such feeling. For many Americans, war was not the answer, and the effect did not seem to match the desired outcome of peace.[3] Each war was followed by another war. Billy, camping in the mountains of New Mexico, "said softly before he slept again that the one thing he knew of all things claimed to be known was that there was no certainty to any of it. Not just the coming of war. Anything at all" (*Crossing* 346). Billy's loss of faith mirrors the American doubts that increase as cause and effect (basic units of Newtonian science) come into question. Newtonian physics searches for the fundamental building blocks of nature, and in doing so, implies the existence of one single truth, hence one story, central to the makeup of the universe. The physical manifestation of Newtonian physics is the atomic bomb.[4] Quantum theory, on the other hand, questions that thesis, and McCarthy's in

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sistence that we "turn the page" argues instead that the storyteller's relationship mirrors that of the researcher to the researched.[5]

At the heart of the new post World War II world is physics. The alteration of science from the Cartesian, Newtonian physics of cause and effect changes the relationship between scientist and object, researcher and researched, and storyteller and story. Other critics have pointed out John Grady Cole's basic philosophy: he believes he can go to Mexico and, through hard work, re-create a life.[6] This cause and effect ideology is shattered by the interrelations with other characters. Linear history neglects the complex cosmic web that makes up the universe. Instead, modern physics, quantum physics and relativity theory, have "shown that subatomic particles are not isolated grains of matter but are probability patterns, interconnections in an inseparable cosmic web that includes the human observer and her consciousness. Relativity theory has made the cosmic web come alive [. . .] by showing that its activity is the very essence of its being" (Capra 91-92). The presence of horrific and violent technological (war-related) events increases the need for stories to aid in understanding. Witnessing becomes a shamanistic ritual that countermands the simple cause and effect relationship between events. The witness to an event becomes not simply the teller of the story, but an integral part of the story itself. For McCarthy, quantum physics and chaos theory (the new science), in their abandonment of the search for the fundamental building blocks of matter, represent the importance of the witness. The objective reality and truth of a single storyteller is invalid, and the attempt to create a single truth, a single ledger, is dangerous. More dangerous, though, is the willingness to blindly follow and accept one storyteller's version. Instead, the uncertainty must be met with witness after witness that posit a truth and order based on probability. The story should examine the whole unit, searching for the interrelated patterns, not the fundamental parts themselves. McCarthy's southwestern fiction (and perhaps all of his fiction) examines the nostalgic quest for a cause and effect existence in a quantum, chaos world. John Grady Cole, Billy Parham, and even the Judge attempt to shape a world in which actions predict results. Theirs is a closed, thermodynamic system moving towards a greater entropy. However, McCarthy creates a world based on probability, a world in which results are a product of interrelated actions within an open system. All stories are one story, because cause and effect in quantum theory are one and the same. Equilibrium, the goal of any open system, requires witness and the willingness to recognize one's place in that witnessed event.

"If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" the Judge argues, because war, in the twentieth century, fuels the scientific attempt at discovering and breaking the universe down to its smallest, fundamental parts. Locating subatomic particles, tracing one's genealogy, uncovering the genetic code, locating the puppet master or the coiner all speak to Newtonian physics. In twentieth century physics, after World War II, "the image of the universe as a machine has been transcended by a view of it as one indivisible, dynamic whole whose

parts are essentially interrelated and can be understood only as patterns of a cosmic process [. . . .] the interrelations between the parts of the whole are more fundamental than the parts themselves" (Capra 92). The Judge tells the kid that no man was required "to give more than he possessed nor was any man's share compared to another's" (307). The Judge sees the world as parts contributing to a whole in which each part must be examined for its role in the common. The Judge, though smart, is (to paraphrase my students) nuts.[7] He attempts to control the story in his ledger; he kills all who witness for themselves. Murder is not the Judge's worst crime, though. He stifles the witness, destroying all evidence of alternative stories, reserving and preserving his vision of the world. Yet, he ends the novel "dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (335). The focus on the individual part of the whole represents Newton, but runs counter to quantum physics that posits "[t]here is motion but there are, ultimately, no moving objects; there is activity but there are no actors; there are no dancers, there is only the dance" (Capra 92).

For McCarthy, though, there may be only one story, but there are multiple witnesses, and Billy's despair in *The Crossing* is the Newtonian attempt to locate a fundamental truth, a cause and affect relationship, that provides the building block to meaning. Billy, in *The Crossing*, is the representative witness in McCarthy's world. Much like the kid perhaps, he believes that "if [he] did not speak [he] would not be recognized" (*Blood Meridian* 328). Billy, unlike Cole, learns. He hears the stories and ends the Trilogy with evidence of his witness in his "[g]narled, rope scarred, speckled" hands. More importantly, "[i]n the evening after supper [. . .] he and the children would sit at the kitchen table and he'd tell them about horses and cattle and the old days. Sometimes he'd tell them about Mexico" (*Cities* 290). Billy's recognition of his responsibility as a storyteller mirrors the idea that "the crucial feature of quantum theory is that the observer is not only necessary to observe the properties of an atomic phenomenon, but is necessary even to bring about these properties [. . . .] we can never speak about nature without, at the same time, speaking about ourselves" (Capra 86-87). Because the physicist is so intricately involved in both the research and conclusions, scientists "are responsible for their research not only intellectually but also morally [. . . .] quantum mechanics and relativity theory have opened up two very different paths for physicists to pursue. They may lead us [. . .] to the Buddha or to the Bomb, and it is up to each to decide which path to take" (Capra 87). Billy, at the end of *Cities of the Plain*, recognizes his place within the story as both a part of the story and a cause of the story, as both witness and event; Billy serves as witness to his life and ends known, the child father to the man.

Notes

[1]See Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) for a discussion of WWII's impact on the American

Economy. Obviously, WWI changed the American economy as well: "from a debtor nation it [the United States] had been transformed into a creditor nation, with loans to Europe worth $13,000,000,000" (Gray 50).

I would like to point out that the following paper was one of five essays read during a panel on War and McCarthy's Southwest. The brevity of the essay stems from a maximum ten-minute required reading time.

[2]See my forthcoming article in "Wars and rumors of wars in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy" (forthcoming in *The Southern Quarterly*, Spring 1999:00-00) for a more complete discussion of war and Cormac McCarthy's Southwest.

[3]Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993) argues that the end of World War II in

> 1945 brought both euphoria and a rush to fulfill the promise of the myth of return. [. . .] The nation that emerged from the war, and to which the veterans returned, was not the place they had left [. . . .] [b]ut the most profound gap between expectation and the reality of victory was opened by the breakdown of the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Whatever else victory was supposed to mean, the establishment of permanent peace and a rational world order was the irreducible minimum (329, 332).

[4]See Susan Strehle *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1992) for an excellent discussion of quantum physics in Pynchon, Coover, Gaddis, Barth, Atwood, and Barthelme. Strehle claims that "[f]or a follower of Newton, reality was ordered by the presence of absolute space, time, and motion" (8).

[5]I would like to thank Edwin C. Arnold for telling me that Murray Gell-Mann, in his 1994 *The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex*, thanks "friends and colleagues" for helping him craft his book. Cormac McCarthy is one of those friends.

[6]See, in particular, Tom Pilkington's "Fate and Free Will on the American Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Western Fiction,"(*Western American Literature* 27.4 (1993): 311-322) and Diane C. Luce's "'When You Wake': John Grady Cole's Heroism in *All the Pretty Horses*" (*Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach. El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995. 155-68) for discussions of Cole's belief in the American work ethic and his trip to Mexico.

[7]The judge's philosophy, a complex combination of Nietzsche, Heidegger, gnosticism, and much, much more, seems contradictory and confusing. At times, his knowledge is so obfuscatory that he seems a perfect example of the Romantics' contention that a genius and an insane person were not that dramatically different.

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"Chicano"as Label: Factors Affecting Widespread Acceptance by "Insiders" and "Outsiders"

Anne Arundel Thaddeus

Abstract

This paper considers the recently popularized descriptive term "*Chicano*" as a label for Mexican-Americans, and its perception both inside and outside the "Chicano" population. What connotations of the label have limited its universal adoption?

Looking to scholarly research for instances of use of the term *Chicano*, this paper looks for pre-existing connotations. It continues on to the emergence of the use of the term as cultural label in the mid-twentieth century, and looks for connotations added to it during that time's political activism. Finally it looks at the way the term is used and perceived today.

"If George Washington's my father,
Why wasn't he *Chicano?*" [Olivas 1968]

Introduction

In March of 1969, delegates to the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver Colorado adopted a radical "statement of the growing national consciousness of the Chicano people" (Camejo 1971:intro.htm). Entitled *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*, it invoked *Aztlan* as the legendary homeland of the Aztec people, vaguely located to the northwest of Mexico City and described as including northwest Mexico and much of the southwestern United States (Coy 1975:10). Antonio Camejo puts it most succinctly when he describes this document, known as *El Plan*, as a call for "a Chicano nation, and the need for Chicano control of the Chicano community" (1971:intro.htm). Most material refers to El Plan as the outline for *La Causa* (the Cause), and the very first sentence of El Plan sets the tone for the entire document:

> In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal "gringo" invasion of our territories, *we*, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlan from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, *declare* that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny. [Camejo1971: aztlan.htm]

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The term *Chicano* was chosen by "insiders" of the movement to describe themselves (Coy 1975:5), but thirty years later, the term, however likely, is not universally embraced. This paper looks at reactions to the label *Chicano* as it was adopted in 1969, and attempts to determine how those reactions have effected its use, and non-use, today.

Before the Aztlan Revival

Exactly what *Chicano* meant before being taken over by militant activists in the turbulent 1960s is hard to determine. Edward Spicer's research (1972:23) traces the term back to the 1930s when Spanish-speaking people used at least six different terms in reference to themselves, one of which, "a term of uncertain origin had come into use in ordinary conversation among the lower-income Spanish-speaking people, namely, *Chicano*." Harold Coy (1975:4-5) derives the term from "Mexicano," compares the sense of the term to "greenhorn" or "country cousin," and agrees that early in the twentieth century, "migratory workers were calling one another Chicano without giving or taking offense." José Limón (1981:208-209) finds an arguably more "us/them" use of *Chicano* in a joke printed in 1911, in *La Crónica*, a Laredo, Texas newspaper described as "Texas Mexican," and as "actively involved in the defense of its native community in the face if Anglo American dominance." (Limón 1988:112) In this instance, the "Chicano" character is identified with other characters who still maintain their cultural ties with Mexico, and who are thus separated from the one character who, unconvincingly, Americanizes herself. (Limón 1981:208-209, 1988:112)

Generally, in the early twentieth century, use of the term *Chicano* was limited to within the Spanish-speaking community. Reference was to someone from Mexico who was lacking something either of economic status or of "good manners," or to someone not acting the American in America. Some problems of "general" translation across cultures, as well as this Spanish language "insider" usage will be examined more closely later in this paper.

Adoption As Label: 1960's and Aztlan

As a label, *Chicano* was chosen during the 1960s, in a general atmosphere in the United States of militant confrontation. At that time, social upheaval confronted many segments of the American population, and the white majority culture in power was trying desperately to hold its own against the strident voices of so many who turned against the status quo, from the "servant classes" to their own children. The powerful, when confronted with possible loss of their power, often turned to violence to maintain control. In this atmosphere of general militant protest, and after the long history of more or less passive resistance of Spanish-speakers in America in the face of arrogance and oppression by their American neighbors (Chandler 1968:98-123, 253; Romano-V 1968:39-40; Rosaldo, et al 1983; Spicer 1972:37-40), a more militant, in your face kind of confrontation was adopted by the Spanish-speakers. (Chandler 1968:266, Romano-V 1968:40-44,Camejo 1971:intro.htm, Limón 1981:198-200).

El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan outlined

the "national" spirit of this new militancy, in the name of *"we*, the Chicano."(Camejo 1971:aztlan.htm1) Reading El Plan, this author can almost feel the panic of all the white (and brown) Patrones, growers and stock owners, who depended on the cheap labor of the newly immigrated (legal or illegal, no one really cared) to maintain their lifestyle: El Plan declares, among other statements, that "for the very young there will no longer be acts of juvenile delinquency, but revolutionary acts;"(Camejo 1971:aztlan.htm2) in other words, for "us", for La Causa, anything is justified!

Militant activists were encouraging the use of *Chicano*, by any-and-all persons, those outside of the named group as well as those inside, to describe any-and-all Americans of Mexican descent, be they of the first, second, third or "whatever" generation. *Chicano* "was the major symbolic term of all militant leaders." (Spicer 1972:24) "In the 1960s, Chicano groups fought hard to popularize the word Chicano as a replacement for Spanish-American, which implied the assimilation of the Chicano people into U.S. society, left out the Indian heritage, and implied that Chicano history had its origins in Europe." (Calderón 1992:39) In 1968, Octavio Ignacio Romano-V describes "the present Chicano movement" in glowingly positive, though confrontationist, terms. (Romano-V 1968:40) As a label, *Chicano* was put forward to be "a humble term [claimed] as a badge of honor. Such things [had] happened before. Wasn't Yankee a Redcoat's term of derision before New England's rebellious colonists proudly took it for a name?" (Coy 1975; see also Limón 1981:200-201) Limón goes on to state that "by the late 1960's [*Chicano*] had gained widespread popularity among students and other non-student activists both as a general term and as a political-cultural symbol." (Limón 1981:201)

But *Chicano* did not achieve the hoped for universality. In Y. Arturo Cabrera's 1971 book *Emerging Faces, the Mexican Americans*, his use of *Chicano* is limited mainly to chapters specifically concerning politics, and his glossary definition reads, "an old term revived with varied acceptance." (Cabrera 1971:83). Coy, in 1975, states "not all older persons of Mexican descent liked being called Chicanos," though he goes on to say that "since 1970, 'Chicano' has been winning acceptance" as an informal form of *Mexican-American* (Coy 1975:6). Ernesto Galarza clearly delineates his use of *Chicano* as a sector of "young avant garde" within the overall Mexican American culture (1972:287), and Spicer says that in the late 1960s, "the term *Chicano* was rejected, usually in favor of 'Mexican' or 'Mexican-American,' by those who shunned militant associations and who were inclined to use *la raza* as a collective term when they wished to express pride in their cultural background." (1972:24)

> Limón gives us this description of early "insider" reaction:
> Almost immediately after its public appearance within the student movement the term set off controversy and debate within the larger U.S.-Mexican community. The general reaction ranged from indifference to outright rejection and hostility. (Limón 1981:201)

Limón quotes several surveys, mostly from the early 1970s, indicating rejection as a universal, or even popular term of self-reference within the community. (1981:201-204) He also mentions "some evidence of a relatively greater popularity. . .among younger members of the population," (Limón 1981:204) and differences in its popularity when used as a "public self-reference" versus its use "in a private—that is, in-group—context". (Limón 1981:204)

Thus, even while *Chicano* is gaining popularity as a label, particular negative attitudes are being associated with it, even if those attitudes differ from the particular attitudes we saw earlier in the century.

General /Political: 1970s to Today

Chicano continued through the 1990s to be used as a general term for all Americans of Mexican descent, but political overtones, both stated and not, are present in many cases. Arnulfo D. Trejo used "The Chicanos: As We See Ourselves" as title for his collection of original essays from several authors expressing their "opinions as Chicanos and as subject specialists." (Trejo 1979:xv) He begins his own introduction to the work, "I am a Chicano," and goes on to describe "*Chicano* [as] the only term that was especially selected by us, for us." (Trejo 1979:xv-xvii) In his essay included in Trejo's collection, Rudolph O. de la Garza, however, uses an entire paragraph to define the "distinction between Chicano and Mexican American," and chooses to use *Mexican Americans* as all inclusive, rather than *Chicano*. (de la Garza 1979:101-102)

Renato Rosalvo uses it almost exclusively in a 1985 article for the Annual Review of Anthropology entitled "Chicano Studies, 1970-1984;" (Rosalvo 1985) his article also quotes other authors who appear to use *Chicano* as the preferred label. (Rosalvo 1985:408, 410) Rosalvo does give brief acknowledgment to a narrower meaning of an "urban (often university based) political movement that emerged in the late 1960s." (1985:411) Jóse Reyna, in his introduction to the inaugural issue of "Perspectives in Mexican American Studies," (1988) uses *Chicano* liberally, though he never pauses to define it one way or the other.

Frances R. Aparicio in a 1994 article for American Literature "On Sub-Versive Signifiers," invokes the "militant reaffirmation of Chicano identity politics" in her description of authors who use the Spanish phonetic system within English, for example "*hay plescha lichans tu di flac*" by Saul Sanchéz. (Aparicio 1994:798) Héctor Peréz in 1998 uses "'Chicano/a'. . .to refer to the larger Mexican-American population which transcends the Texas Mexico border," (Pérez 1998:45n.3) but Rafael Perez-Torres speaks of the "rapidly shifting ground upon which the signifier 'Chicano' stands" and the "the dynamic complexities of Chicano/a cultural identities." (Perez-Torres 1998:678)

Associations of political activism, although not pervasive, are solidifying for our label, *Chicano*, and it is still not completely accepted as a universal label for all Mexican Americans.

2002: Mexican/American

Dictionaries define the word *Chicano* variously as: "A Mexican-American[<Am.Sp. *Mexicano*]" (American Heritage Dictionary 1994:152-153); "a Mexican-American" (Oxford American Dictionary1980: 144); and (ca.1954) an American of Mexican descent (Webster's Ninth New College Dictionary 1991:232). So it is understandable that all the historical experiences of Mexicans "in America" are called forth when *Chicano* is used.

The story of "the first *Chicano*" is the story of the first Mexican to step north across an imaginary line that no one had even imagined at the time of that first crossing. Susan Keefe and Amado Padilla summarize Chicano ethnicity:

> "As a result of this early historical development, the United States's annexation of the Southwest, and the penetration of Mexico by U.S. interests, the Chicanos have a diverse historical experience. They can be divided into three main types, to some degree overlapping: (1) the original inhabitants of the Southwest (today located primarily in northern New Mexico and Southern California), (2) the immigrants to the United States since 1910, and (3) the descendants of both these groups." (Calderón 1992:38)

To address the first group, Coy reminds us early in his book that Santa Fe is the "oldest state capital in the United States." (Coy 1975:11) He attributes Will Rogers with "once [saying] that the New Mexicans could have sent a committee to welcome John Smith to Jamestown." (Coy 1975:70) Coy then relates the story of these Mexican settlers, whose land would later be turned into a part of the United States by treaty (Guadalupe Hidalgo) or "purchase" (Gadsen), as well as the often overlooked story of the *vaqueros*, cow-boys before there were "cowboys," and the story of the California mission settlements, including the influence of Mexican mining technology during the Gold Rush. (1975:59-78, see also McWilliams 1983)

How did these citizens of Mexico become Chicanos? "The Mexican War in 1846-1848, known in Mexico as the North American Invasion, is remembered as the occasion when Mexico in defeat surrendered an immense territory. This was followed by the Gadsen purchase and more [parts of Mexico] became part of the United States." (Cabrera 1971:1) Within this "territory acquired by the United States, there remained a population of Mexican origin," (León-Portilla 1972:102) and all of "those who were living in the region came under American rule." (Galarza 1971:271) And not everyone was jumping for joy:

> Thus was the American government introduced to the New Mexican. Instead of receiving the relief and security which he sorely needed, he was embroiled in factional political strife, was subjected to the bewildering tug-of-war of political pressures, and was assigned prerogatives and responsibilities which were not only meaningless to him but

> which were of questionable validity. A populace ignorant of modern ways, was thrown into a situation which would task the most enlightened of societies. Centuries behind the times, without a democratic tradition, unaware of their rights and status, and incapable of voicing their views an feelings, they became cannon fodder for political guns. . . .
>
> Ruthless politicians and merchants acquired their stock, their water rights, their land. The land grants became involved in legal battles. [Sanchéz 1983:83]

In Texas,

> Once Texas was independent it left the door open wide for massive migration from the United States. Title to land had already been granted under Mexican Sovereignty. Through legal and extra legal means, the land was taken away from those provincial Mexicans, who as Texans had cooperated to try to give the province a measure of autonomy. These were the betrayed people, betrayed by their fellow Texas, once Texas became fully autonomous. [Alvarez 1983:32]

Paredes's version adds this less than gentle irony: "In *The Texas Rangers* Professor Webb notes that on the border after 1848 the Mexican was 'victimized by the law,' [and] that 'the old landholding families found their titles in jeopardy and if they did not lose in the courts they lost to their American Lawyers.' (Paredes 1983:108)." Undoubtedly, the Mexican-Americans' emotional experience would be characterized as negative. "These are bitter roots in history for Mexican and Mexican-American alike and go far in explaining some of the suspicion held toward the Colossus of the North." (Cabrera 1971:1)

Keefe and Padilla's second group came to America when "Mexican immigration to the United States was at flood tide during the Revolution, World War I, and the booming 1920s." (Coy 1975:47) What brought them in such great numbers just then?

> Many of these later immigrants came chiefly from the northern and central plateaus of Mexico, seeking relief from intolerable living conditions, the products of frequent revolutions, dictatorial and feudal-type exploitation, and because the American railroad and agricultural interests and mining interests actively recruited them to fill the immediate needs for "unskilled" labor in a booming economy. (Cabrera 1971:2)

For whatever reason they came, and whoever they were,

> unless they had ready cash they would soon be picking cotton. Those with a profession or trade were no better off. Unable to work at their highest skills, they had no choice but to sign with a labor contractor to work in *el fil* (the fields) or *el traque* (the railroad tracks)... "Stoop labor" it was called, bending to strip from snowy bolls the cot-

> ton lint so much in demand for automobile tires and wartime uniforms." (Coy 1975:48)

And of course, everything just had to be bigger and bolder in Texas: "Though discrimination is not limited to Texas, it sometimes shows itself there with a virulence that suggests a fierce and ancient blood feud between peoples." (Coy:1975:37) Américo Paredes, Texas folklorist and Mexican American, explored this virulence in a novel, *George Washington Gómez*. Written between 1936 and 1940, though not published until 1990, "Américo Paredes's novel, addresses issues of social injustice exacerbated by the additional pressures of the economic crisis." (Pérez 1998:27) *George Washington Gómez* may be fiction, but it is verified by "scholarship"; in 1958 The University of Texas Press published Paredes's *With His Pistol In His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. Paredes uses the particular "Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" as a framework for his detailing of the history of the South Texas border area. With documented examples of uncalled for violence, cowardice and exaggeration on the part of the Texas Rangers in the early twentieth century, Paredes "presents a different oral tradition than the usual Anglo one." (Rosaldo, et al 1983:98) He concludes:

> The Rangers and those who imitated their methods undoubtedly exacerbated the cultural conflict on the Border rather than allayed it. The assimilation of north-bank Border people into the American commonwealth was necessary to any effective pacification of the Border. Ranger operations did much to impede that end. They created in the Border Mexican a deep and understandable hostility for American authority; they drew Border communities even closer together than they had been, though at that time they were beginning to disintegrate under the impact of new conditions.

Terror cowed the more inoffensive Mexican, but it also added to the roll of bandits and raiders many high-spirited individuals who would have otherwise remained peaceful, useful citizens. [Paredes 1983:109]

The collectors' introduction to this piece in a 1983 volume of Chicano history points out that "recent historical research tends to support the *Mexicano* viewpoints." (Rosaldo, et al 1983:98) The original injustices were bad enough, but when the dominant version erases the injustice, or turns the facts around to accuse the victim, what can be expected but an emotional reponse.

Thirdly, we have the children and children's children from both these disparate groups, the "first-, second-, and third-generation Chicanos of various levels of acculturation." (Calderón 1992:38) Coy spins a tale going back five generations into the history of California and Texas, a story of railroad track laying, copper smelting, relocating for better education, of forced "repatriation" to Mexico, the loss of even "stoop work" in the fields to more recent emigrants, fighting for "our country," assimilation and discrimination. (Coy 1975:27-55) All born in the United States, and all looking for a decent life.

These particular native born citizens of the United States face several

obstacles on the way to the American dream. Prominent and pernicious among these obstacles is stereotyping, because the stereotype is so often used as justification for discrimination or worse, cruelty. David J. Weber traces the "American's" image of the "Mexican" beyond recent culture clashes at physical borders, back into European history and (English) Protestant attitudes toward (Spanish) Catholics. (1984:59) Whatever the distant origins of the negative stereotype of the Mexican as lazy, cruel, cowardly, treacherous, thieving, and degenerate due to mixture of inferior blood elements, (Weber 1984:56-61, Paredes 1984:101) Américo Paredes points out one very good reason that the "American" has persisted in keeping Mexican-American, and thus *Chicano* stereotypes alive.

> Even a cursory analysis shows the justification value of the Texas legend [and its stereotype of the Mexican] and gives us a clue to one of the reasons for its survival. Goldfinch puts most Americans coming into the Brownsville-Matamoros area after the Mexican War into two categories: those who had no personal feeling against the Mexicans but who were ruthless in their efforts to acquire a fortune quickly, and those who, inclined to be brutal to everyone, found in the Mexican's defenseless state after the war an easy and safe outlet for their brutality. It was to the interest of these two types that the legend about the Mexican be perpetuated. As long as the majority of the population accepted it as fact, men of this kind could rob, cheat, or kill the Border Mexican without suffering sanctions either from the law or from public opinion. And if the Mexican retaliated, the law stepped in to defend or avenge his persecutors. [Paredes 1983:104]

Small wonder that the stereotype remained in place, and informs many actions and reactions to this day.

Translation

To briefly restate its original justification as a label, *Chicano* was chosen from the language of the oppressed Spanish-speaker in the United States, as a self-label to communicate something of the Mexican American experience to greater *Anglo* (vaguely meaning "American, English-speaking, dominant in recent history") society and to the rest of the world, and to strongly identify this "something" with the people so labeled. But because it is a word from another language, in order to accomplish this communication *Chicano* requires translation: from the language of Spanish as spoken "in" the U. S., in this case dialectic Spanish long ago and many times over removed from Spain, to the language of those people who are intended to get the message, mostly the Anglos who speak English, ironically also long removed from England. This translation can plausibly be described as a case of translating from the "Third World" to the "First World."

In a 1995 collection of essays on "translation and cross-cultural texts,"

Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier give us extensive reason to question such cross-cultural translations; the point is made again and again that there are many difficulties inherent in translating words from one culture to another. This point is made by editors Dingwaney and Maier, not only in the introductions to each section of the book but also in their own contributed essays, and it is made by several other contributors (Rosario Ferré, Sharon Masingale Bell, Mahasweta Sengupta, Mary N. Layoun, bell hooks, Talal Asad, and James BoydWhite), (Dingwaney and Maier 1995). Some indicative titles include: "In the Shadow of the Father Tongue" (Bell), "Translation as Manipulation: The Power of Images and Images of Power" (Sengupta), "Language, a place for struggle" (hooks) and "A Comment on Translation, Critique and Subversion" (Asad). A cautionary note is felt to be prudent here: this difficulty is exactly what the collectors, Dingwaney and Maier, requested "in [their] letter to potential contributors." (Dingwaney 1995:8)

A decade earlier, Renato Rosaldo quotes the exposition of one example of "mistranslation" and how it is "elegantly dismantle[d]" by Américo Paredes in Paredes's 1978 essay "On ethnographic work among minority groups." (1985:409) Rosaldo goes on to conclude:

> Suffice it to say that further examples in Paredes's essay are circumstantial, abundant, and convincing. Ethnographic errors in Madsen and Rubel include, among others, mistranslations, failing to see double meanings in speech, taking literally what people meant figuratively, and taking seriously what people meant as a joke. If ethnographers wish to move beyond stereotypes, Paredes suggests, they must acquire a deep grasp of the language, a fine understanding of social relations, and a rich sense of social context that minimally includes the ability to distinguish joking banter from deadly earnest. [Rosaldo 1985:409]

Unfortunately, each individual that makes up "greater Anglo society and the rest of the world," the supposed target audience of the chosen label *Chicano*, is not likely to be well versed in anthropologic or linguistic theory of translation, and is therefore not likely to seek out the cultural information necessary to "translate" this label with reference to its more subtle connotation. And why should they imagine that further research might be necessary? "Insiders" have gifted the "outside world" with a public and positive meaning for the label *Chicano*, and decreed that it is to be interpreted/translated by "everyone" as proffered by and taken without insult. ". . .The Anglo-American—its government, educational circles, and mass media[,] all of them make free use of this important bit of folk culture transmited to them by an insistent. . .student movement." (Limón 1981:219) Limón adds "*and, perhaps at times insensitive*," to this description. (Limón 1981:219, emphasis added) and he looks closely at this aspect of the label *Chicano*.

Militant activism is, by its very nature, strident, and yet the "loudest"

contingent does not always speak for the entire community, and José Limón explores this aspect of "the problems inherent in the use of the term 'Chicano'" in terms of his own specialty, folklore, and "the relationship between mass cultural forms such as folklore and social movements led by political elites." (1981:197)

> *In part* this failure may be attributed to the unintentional violation of the community's rules about the socially appropriate use of the term—rules keyed on the community's definition of the performance of the term as belonging to the folklore genre of nicknaming and ethnic slurs. [Limón 1981:197]

Limón gives his own preferred etymology in his restatement of Tino Villanueva's 1978 "fine linguistic study." (Limón 1981:206) Villanueva considers "*chicano*" the product of a phase in child-language development as exploited in an adult expressive naming practice, (Limón 1981:207) From this linguistic point of origin, Limón takes his reader through examples of "folkloric" uses of *Chicano*, the general "socio-psychological significance [of] nicknames and slurs [that] may direct culturally charged language against social problems," (Limón 1981:211-212) the status of *Chicano* as "both and intra-ethnic class-based slur and a nickname," (Limón 1981:213), and "the restricted social character of folklore," (Limón 1981:214) as an "in-group phenomenon," (Limón 1981:215).

> It is [Limón's] contention, then that the folk performance of "*chicano*" is governed by certain cultural rules of restriction. *Ideally*, an appropriate performance occurs in a small, largely male, Spanish-language-dominant in-group, with some ludic dimensions. This performance context stands in sharp contrast to the public, inter-group, English-language, seriously discursive settings in which the term is used ideologically. In part the documented rejection of the term by the larger Texas-Mexican community may be fundamentally a rejection of a performance context it judges inappropriate for this essentially folkloric term. [Limón 1981:217]

As for the "social movements led by political elites," Limón paraphrases Clifford Geertz to help make a very important point.

> Cultural ideologies formulated by nationalist intellectuals sometimes misfire and fail to take hold among those whose unity and support is sought. . . . The folk may not always be happy with what youthful, student, political people do with their expressive culture; and those who would use folklore and other aspects of culture should pay attention not only to textual accuracy but to such things as context, performance rules, and the folk's attitude toward its own folklore. [Limón 1981:219-220]

Insensitivity, indeed.

Connotation

From all this, what connotation expresses itself when *Chicano* is used to label a group, a person, or an attitude?

Listen for an American epic of courage to tame the desert frontier, displacement from homes wrested from that frontier, incomprehensible land laws and lawyers that win the case but then take the land or its entire value in payment, victimization by violent oppression and by stereotypical attitudes, passive resistance in the face of unjustifiable injustice, and reassertivness to the point of lawlessness. Listen for an inside joke. Listen for grinding poverty, and stories of a better life "in America." Listen for a mother in conversation with her child. Listen for those caught on the wrong side of yet another revolution in Mexico. Listen for music! Listen for a loving but mildly embarrassing pet name made public by "the kids." And then listen as it is appropriated by a "reformed" local bully. The label *Chicano* comes to us not only rich with meaning, but also teeeming with emotions.

Chicano was chosen to be a label to be attached to the Mexican-American experience precisely because of its rich connotation. But it is argued that emotional reaction interferes with *Chicano*'s use as a descriptive parameter when it is released from the named group, in order to be applied by "outsiders" as the Chicano Movement has done. The term is definately experienced differently by "insiders" and "outsiders;" and evidence is presented here that, further, *Chicano* is experienced differently by different subgroups of "insiders." As early as 1981, José Limón proposed that "perhaps the time has come for a critical assessment of the chicano movement's appropriation of this folk name." (1981:219-220)

The name is not accepted or universally used as the unifying "badge of honor" it was proposed to become. More Mexican-Americans, in fact, reject *Chicano* as an official label than embrace it. It appears after more than thirty years to be at least a partial failure in terms of its acceptance as a positive label, or even a neutral, noninsulting one. But Anglos have accepted with alacrity the concept of *Chicano* as label, and will continue to use it as such, unless an appropriate replacement is overwhelmingly proposed. There is great opportunity for research into the realistic possibility of a label that can be accepted with positive emotions by all involved, the "insiders" and the "outsiders" equally.

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The Educational and Occupational Aspirations and Expectations of Mexican American Children Living in Colonias

Jaime Chahin

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to survey the educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of Mexican American children living in the colonias.

To complete this study, 100 junior high students residing in colonias in El Paso and Monte Alto, Texas were randomly selected as the study population.

The data for this study was gathered through the use of group-administered questionnaires. The data compared were analyzed in terms of migrant status, gender, language and level of education of parents. Chi-square was used to determine the effects of independent variables in relation to educational and occupational levels.

The finding indicates that children residing in colonias, regardless of gender or economic background, have high aspirations. Children that indicated that their parents spoke English had statistically significant higher aspirations and expectations. There was also a significant difference between gender and the desire for a military career where males were more likely to consider a military future. Furthermore, parents were ranked the most influential by students in determining career choices. Given the limited educational and career opportunities that exist in these isolated school districts, and the low level of formal education of parents, it is imperative that educational interventions involve families and communities.

KEYWORDS: Colonias, Mexican American, Educational Aspirations, Language, Children

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Introduction

In Texas and along the US-Mexico border, Hispanics have become the largest minority group, more than three-fourths of the Hispanic population counted in the 2000 Census resided in California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey. Similarly, Texas border counties account for a significant portion of the Hispanic population in Texas. The rapid growth and fragile economic infrastructure has impacted families, communities, and public institutions.

Along the Texas-Mexico border, however, there are impoverished communities in rural areas called "colonias." These impoverished communities are characterized as having substandard housing; lack adequate or have nonexistent waste disposal; lack plumbing; have Third World diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis; lack infrastructure, water, and sewage systems; and in many areas school dropout rates close to 50 percent (Alexander et. Al, 1993; Cappock, 1994; Daily, 1997; Holz & Davies, 1992; Keeton and Harmony, 1994; Pasley, 1988; Ramos, 1996; Salinas, 1998; Sralla, 1993; Tisdale, 1993). In 1995, the Texas Water Development Board estimated more than 340,000 people resided in colonias, and children under the age of 17 constituted more than 36 percent of the total colonia population. Thus, the education of children is critical to breaking the cycle of poverty as demonstrated by numerous students at the Llano Research Grande Center at Edcouch-Elsa High School (Harmon, 2000).

Despite the aforementioned impoverished conditions, colonia families and their children continue to survive and, in some instances, succeed as a result of their community's resourcefulness. Erik Duus, a Norwegian who studied the relationships of women and their communities, defined this resourcefulness as *impostura,* or the interdependence within a community in which the sharing of food is commonplace, so members of the community rely on each other for sustenance (Esteva & Prakash, 1998). Duus goes on to say that *"Impostura* means togetherness and that we treat each other in the neighborhood . . . *Impostura* means us having good friends and being considerate each day as poor people" (Esteva & Prakash, 1998).

In these isolated rural colonias along the Texas-Mexico border, families maintain networks through local institutions such as churches, extended families, schools, and community or civic organizations.

This study examines the relationship between migrant status, gender, language, and level of education of parents relative to colonia youth's educational and occupational aspirations and expectations. A survey was conducted of 100 randomly selected middle school stu-

dents residing in colonias in southern and northern parts of the Texas-Mexico border. Aspirations were defined as the desires of the individual for attainment of a particular goal, such as education or occupation. Expectations were defined as the individual's estimation of his or her probable attainment in reference to a particular goal area. The use of the terms "Hispanic" and "Mexican American" will be used interchangeably, depending on the population that was used in each of the studies described below.

Review of Literature

During the last century, empirical literature was replete with references to Mexican-American youth as having certain pathological behavior (Kluckhohn, 1961; Saunders, 1954; Knowlton, 1962; Heller, 1966; 1971, Gordon, 1970). Even though things have changed, the lack of, or differences in educational attainment are sometimes explained with the "cultural deficit" or "culture of poverty model" (Baca, 1989; Keddie, 1973; Lewis, 1968). Furthermore, claims that the cultural deficit model has been displaced and no longer in use seems premature.

During the 1980s, a number of theories emerged about the attainment of the "underclass" (Auletta, 1982; Lemann, 1986A, 1986B; Murray, 1984; Ryan, 1971; Sowell, 1981; and Steele, 1990) that continue to perpetuate the cultural deficit model. This model focuses on individual and group characteristics and avoids institutional or social structural factors.

Studies on the aspirations of Mexican Americans (Guerra, 1959; De Hoyos, 1961; Juarez, 1968; Kuviesky, 1976; Venegas, 1973; Chahin, 1977) clearly substantiated the fact that Hispanics had high aspirations. These high educational aspirations challenge the cultural deficit model, therefore we need to review other related studies that examine other variables that might be impeding success.

In his study, Matute-Bianchi (as cited in Gibson and Ogbu, 1991) pointed to a relationship between academic achievement and students' perceptions of ethnic identity. According to Matute-Bianche, ethnic identity becomes part of an interactive process, which includes the students and the institutions within a social context. The study further pointed out that the intra-group variability that exists among Mexican descent students needs to be critically examined to ensure that we do not continue to use single cause explanations for the underachievement of Mexican-American students. Furthermore, positive self-identity of "Mexicanos" has to be used as an asset in helping students succeed and achieve their aspirations (Gibson and Ogbu, 1991).

Other relevant studies have indicated that the stigma of the lack of educational attainment can have a great effect on the related but peripheral characteristics of the population, such as income, employment, unemployment, housing, and occupations. Jorge Chapa's analysis of the 1990 Census materials shows that a high concentration *(50%)* of Spanish-speaking people fall under the indicator of "under four years" of education, which in turn is described by some educators as being functionally illiterate (Chapa, 1992). However, the continued low educational

performance of Mexican Americans cannot be explained by any single variable without taking into account other structural and economic factors.

According to more recent studies, the aspirations and expectations of Hispanic students tend to be lower than that of white students (Smith, 1995). Due to their lower family socio-economic status (SES) background, Hispanic students are less likely to maintain their high aspirations throughout high school (Kao and Tienda, 1998). Kao and Tienda find Hispanic youth have less stable aspirations than white or Asian students due to lower family socio-economic backgrounds. According to a United States youth study on "lost talent," social class and membership in a lower socio-economic group doubles the risk of youth failing to achieve their aspirations (Hanson, 1994). Researchers also find that Hispanics are not only less likely to have taken advanced science or mathematics courses (Smith, 1995), but they are also below proficiency in both of these subjects (Kaufman, Chavez, and Lauen, 1998). This can be attributed to under funded public schools that are not providing the appropriate curriculum.

Studies conducted by researchers to determine whether acculturation affects students' aspirations have produced conflicting results. In their study, Ramos and Sanchez (1995) concluded that Mexican-American students' aspirations are affected not only by their level of acculturation, but also by their academic performance. Students' parents expect them to attend post-secondary education, which in turn, affects how students perceive their future. On the other hand, Hurtado and Gauvain (1997) find that acculturation among Mexican-American youth is not related to aspirations or planning for college; however, it does predict future college attendance.

Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) conducted a study to attempt to explain the social attainment of Mexican-American youth. They use the concept of social capital rather than classical explanations of social attainments based on the process of parental encouragement and assessment of merit by self and others. As used in this study, "social capital" refers to social relationships from which an individual is potentially able to derive institutional support, particularly knowledge-based resources. Even though the findings indicated some evidence for the relation between grades and status expectations and measures of social capital, the strongest relations are among language measures, implying that bilinguals may have special advantages in acquiring the institutional support necessary to succeed and achieve higher or upward social mobility.

It is quite clear that the divergence in the perspectives of recent researchers is reflective of some contemporary academicians growing up in minority communities. The research has focused on socio-economic issues, language, and culture, which are critical factors in the development of individuals. This has led to research that focuses on the strengths and assets of our students. These comprehensive research approaches have served to dismantle long held stereotypes that continued to perpetuate interventions that were ineffective in our communities.

Little attention, however, has been given to the educational and occupational characteristics of children living

in colonias. With the exception of Cappock's work (1994), little research has been conducted which analyzes the educational and occupational characteristics of colonia children. Despite the 40 to 50 percent dropout rate for low-income Hispanic populations, the sample of 251 secondary school students from colonias in four Laredo, Texas, schools exhibited exceptionally high aspirations for education and lifestyle, and expressed an optimistic attitude toward and belief in hard work and dedication (Cappock, 1994).

In the midst of this condition, the Llano Grande Research Project at Edcouch-Elsa High School, which emphasizes writing and analytical skills, continues to identify and develop students with high aspirations to attend Ivy League schools. An average of seven to 10 Edcouch-Elsa high school graduates annually matriculate in Ivy League schools (Harmon, 2000).

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to analyze the educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of children from the colonias. Children were recruited from two sites: the colonias of Monte Alto in Monte Alto, Texas, which is located in the Rio Grande Valley and from the Montana Vista and Sparks colonias of El Paso, Texas. Students were selected from the two border counties with the greater amount of colonias in El Paso and Hidalgo County. This small sample is relative to the 30 percent of children that reside in the colonias. With the assistance and approval of school administrations and parents, seventh and eighth grade students, who have Mexican-American backgrounds, were randomly selected for our sample population. A total of 100 students participated in the 31-question survey. Aspirations are the desires of the individual for attainment of a particular goal such as education or occupation. Expectations are the individual's estimation of his probable attainment in reference to a particular goal area. We asked these questions to determine if the aspirations are congruent with the expectations.

The questionnaire surveyed certain aspects in areas of (1) educational projections (2) occupational projections and (3) migrant participation. The questionnaire provided fixed-choice stimulus questions that elicited responses that indicated educational and occupational aspirations and expectations. A total of 90 students responded to this survey; however, it is important to note that some students did not answer each question. The median age of the participants was 13.1 years. Fifty-three percent of the students who participated in the study were male, and 47 percent were female. The survey was administered to the students by a proctor during the spring of 1999. The instrument had been field tested and administered in the Southwest by the Department of Rural Sociology at Texas A&M and by researchers William Kuvlesky, Rumaldo Juarez, Moises Venegas, and Jaime Chahin. Occupational categories were divided between professional and blue-collar because none of the respondents indicated a preference for unskilled labor categories. Professional occupations were those that required a baccalaureate degree, technical degree, (i.e., draftsman, technician, managerial) or glam-

our (i.e. singer, athlete, etc.). Blue-collar was a category for skilled labor, (i.e., carpenter, mechanic, foreman), fireman, clerical, sales, or operative, (i.e., bus driver, machine operator).

Although, the majority of students who participated in the survey have Hispanic backgrounds, the language of the survey, was in English.

Findings

Chi square statistics were used to test the level of significance between gender, parents, language, and migrant status in relation to their educational and occupational levels. The data reveal a statistically significant relationship between the language spoken at home and the educational aspirations (Table 1). Students who indicated that their parents spoke English and Spanish had higher educational aspirations than students who indicated that their parents did not speak English. More than 96 percent of the students who indicated that their parents spoke English aspired to obtain a junior college education or above, while only 3.8 percent aspired to obtain a high school degree or less. Seventy-three percent of the students who indicated that their parents did not speak English aspired to obtain a junior college education or above, and almost 27 percent aspired to obtain a high school degree or less. In other words, students whose parents are bilingual had higher educational aspirations than students whose parents only spoke Spanish. This relationship was significant at the .01 level of significance. Thus the student's educational aspirations are congruent with their actual expectations when the parents spoke English.

The results of the survey also indicated that there was a significant relationship between the language spoken at home and the students' educational expectations (Table 2). Students who indicated that their parents spoke English and Spanish had higher educational expectations than students who indicated that their parents did not speak English. Sixty-seven percent of the students surveyed indicated that their parents spoke English. Of these students, 92.5 percent indicated that they expected to complete a junior college education or higher, while only 7.5 percent indicated that they expected to complete a high school degree or less. On the other hand, of the 33 percent of students who indicated that their parents did not speak English, 73.1 percent expected to complete a junior college education or higher, and 26.9 percent expected to complete a high school degree or less. Therefore, students whose parents are bilingual had higher educational expectations than students who only spoke Spanish. This relationship was significant at the .05 level of significance.

No significant differences were found between the educational aspirations of students from El Paso and Monte Alto (Table 3). Both groups exhibited similar educational aspirations, although a slightly higher proportion of students from Monte Alto desired to obtain a junior college education or higher. Overall, more than 88 percent of the students aspired to obtain a junior college education or higher. Students from the colonias of Monte Alto, Montana Vista, and Sparks exhibited high educational aspirations.

The data did not reveal any significant differences between a student's

Table 1

Educational Aspirations by Language Spoken at Home

	Educational Aspirations		
Language Spoken	High school or less N (percent)	Junior college or above N (percent)	Total N (percent)
No English	7 (26.9)	19 (73.1)	26 (32.9)
English	2 (3.8)	51 (96.2)	53 (67.1)
			79(100.0)

x2 = 9,260; DF = 1; Level of Significance = .002

Table 2

Educational Expectations by Language Spoken at Home

	Educational Expectations		
Language Spoken	High school or less N (percent)	Junior college or above N (percent)	Total N (percent)
No English	7 (26.9)	19 (73.1)	26 (32.9)
English	4 (7.5)	49 (92.5)	53 (67.1)
			79 (100.0)

x2 = 5.464; DF = 1; Level of Significance = .019

educational aspirations and a student's occupational aspirations (Table 4). Almost 69 percent of all students surveyed aspired to have a professional career, while 31.1 percent aspired to have a blue-collar career regardless of their educational aspirations. Overall, a higher proportion of students indicated that they aspired to have a professional career rather than a blue-collar career. Students who indicated they aspired to complete technical college or less were just as likely as students who wanted to complete junior college or higher to aspire to a professional career. The educational aspirations were congruent with their professional career aspirations.

In terms of occupational expectations, no significant differences existed in relation to the student's educational aspirations (Table 5). More than 61 percent of the students expected to have a professional career, while 38.9 percent expected to have a blue-collar career regardless of educational aspirations. Overall, the majority of the students expected to have a professional career rather than a blue-collar career. In comparing career aspirations, as discussed above, with expectations it is interesting to note that some of the students who aspired to have a professional career indicated that they actually expected to have a blue-collar career. The aspirations and expectations of the students were therefore congruent.

No significant relationship was found between gender and educational aspirations (Table 6). The data revealed that both males and females possessed high educational aspirations. More than 90 percent of females and 85.7 percent of males aspired to obtain a junior college education or higher. Overall, 88.1 percent of the students indicated they were interested in obtaining a junior college education or higher, while 11.9 percent indicated they aspired a technical college education or higher. Both males and females exhibited high educational aspirations.

Concerning occupational aspirations, students were asked to indicate what job they would desire most as a life time job if he or she was free to choose. Concerning occupational expectations, students were asked to indicate what kind of job they really expect to have most of their lives. Both of these questions were open-ended, and the responses were then coded according to a modified census classification of occupations, which represents a hierarchy of occupations based on prestige and income. The occupational categories used were the following (U.S. Department of Labor):

Occupational Levels		Types
High	1.	High professional (doctor, lawyer, architect)
	2.	Low professional (teacher, R.N.)
	3.	Glamour (pro ball, pop singer)
	4.	Managerial (executive management)
Intermediate	5.	Draftsmen
	6.	Farmer (owns a ranch)
	7.	Skilled worker (carpenter, auto mechanic)
	8.	Clerical and sales (typist, secretary, salesman)
Low	9.	Operative (bus driver, machine operator)
	10.	Laborer and unskilled worker
	11.	Housewife

Table 3

Educational Aspirations by Student Location

	Educational Aspirations		
	Technical College or less	Junior College or above	Total
Location	N (percent)	N (percent)	N (percent)
El Paso	6 (16.7)	30 (83.3)	36 (42.9)
Monte Alto	4 (8.3)	44 (91.7)	48 (57.1)
			84(100.0)

x2 = 13.267; DF = 4; Level of Significance = .010

Table 4

Educational Aspirations by Occupational Aspirations

	Occupational Aspirations		
Educational Aspiration	Professional N (percent)	Blue-Collar N (percent)	Total N (percent)
Technical College or less	5 (9.8)	6 (26.1)	11 (14.9)
Junior college or above	46 (90.2)	17 (73.9)	63 (85.1)
Total	51 (68.9)	23 (31.1)	74 (100.0)

x2 = 1.339; DF = 1; Level of Significance = .267

Table 5

Occupational Expectations by Educational Aspirations

	Occupational Expectations		
Educational Aspirations	Professional N(percent)	Blue-Collar N(percent)	Total N(percent)
Technical College or less	6 (13.6)	5 (17.9)	11 (15.3)
Junior college or above	38 (86.4)	23 (82.1)	61 (84.7)
Total	44 (61.1)	28 (38.9)	72 (100.0)

x2 = 1.246; DF = 1; Level of Significance = .264

Table 6

Educational Aspirations by Gender

	Educational Aspirations		
Gender	Technical College or less N (percent)	Junior College or above N (percent)	Total N (percent)
Female	4 (9.5)	38 (90.5)	42 (50.0)
Male	6 (14.3)	36 (85.7)	42 (50.0)
			84 (100.0)

x2 = .454; DF = 1; Level of Significance = .500

When asked what type of career they aspired, all the students indicated that they aspired a high level occupation. The majority of the students, 68.4 percent, indicated that they would like to have a high professional career. Only 15.8 percent of the students indicated that they would like to have a low professional career. Another 15.8 percent of the students aspired to have a "glamorous" career. All of the students surveyed said they aspired to have a high level occupation.

Of the students who indicated the job they really expected to have, all said they really expected to have a high level occupation. The majority of the students, 58.9 percent, expected to have a high professional career. More than 26 percent of the students indicated that they expected to have a low professional career, while 14.7 percent expected to have a "glamorous" career. Thus, the aspirations and expectations of the students are very congruent.

Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was found between gender and the desire for a military career (Table 7). Only 16.3 percent of students indicated that they would consider a military career. Of this subset, 14 percent of the students were male, while only 2.3 percent were female. Of the 46.5 percent of students who indicated they would not consider a military career, the majority (24.4 %) were female. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents indicated they were unsure if they desired a military career. This relationship was significant at the *.05* level. More males than females would consider a military career. Hispanic males historically have used the military as a means of obtaining skills and going to college, while females, during the last decade, have higher participation in higher education (ACE, 2001). This finding is congruent with the military participation pattern of Hispanic females.

In selecting the career that they would most like to have, many of the students indicated that it was important that the job offered them a chance to earn a substantial income (47.1%) and steady employment (50%). However, most students felt that it was very important that the job provided them with a chance to help other people (45.6%), to become an important person (40.4%), and that it offered them a chance for excitement (49.4%). Overall, students would like to have a stable job where they can earn a substantial income and help other people (Table 8).

When asked who had the most insight in helping them decide what job they would most like to have, students indicated that their parents were very helpful (72.09%), teachers were second (32.55%) other relatives were third (31.39%) while their friends were second to last (17.44%). This reflects that their families, teachers and relatives who they mostly interact with are the most influential. When asked about the school counselor, many of the students (36.47%) indicated that he or she has been no help in helping them decide what job they would most like to have. Students consider parents the most influential people in helping the students decide what kind of job they would like to have in the future (Table 9).

Table 7

Desire for a Military Career by Gender

	Military			
Gender	Yes N (percent)	Not Sure N (percent)	No N (percent)	Total N (percent)
Female	2 (2.3)	19 (22.1)	21 (24.4)	42 (48.8)
Male	12 (14)	13 (15.1)	19 (22.1)	44 (51.2)
Total	14 (16.3)	32 (37.2)	40 (46.5)	86 (100.0)

x2 = 8.326; DF = 2; Level of Significance = .016

Table 8

Very Important 4	**Important** 3	**Not Very Important** 2	**Not at All Important** 1	
31.03%	47.13%	18.39%	3.45%	Offers you the Chance to make a lot of money
45.56%	35.56%	16.66%	2.22%	Gives you the chance to help other people
40.45%t	35.96%t	20.22%	3.37%	Gives a chance to become an important person
34.1%	50%	14.8%	1.1%	Gives you steady employment
37.1%	39.3%	14.6%	9%	Gives you a chance to be your own boss
49.44%	29.21%	14.61%	6.74%	Offers a chance for excitment

Recommendations and Conclusions

The findings from this study on educational and occupational aspirations of colonia children provide support for Robert Merton's *(1957)* proposition that all kinds of youth in the United States have high success goals of various kinds. In this study, most students regardless of gender, held high aspirations for education and occupation.

Despite that colonias are relatively isolated in poor urban and rural counties along the U.S.-Mexico border, colonia children are success-oriented. Moreover, the majority of the respondents indicated that their parents were the most influential people in helping determine their occupation (Table 9). Furthermore, students whose parents are bilingual had higher aspirations. Perhaps the language skills of the parents provide greater opportunities to effectively interact with the school system and society. The effective interaction of families with the school system strengthens the students' aspirations and self-esteem.

Parents' bilingual skills enhance the opportunities to communicate with the school system that allows them an opportunity to understand the academic expectation and resources required to achieve. Even though numerous school staff are bilingual, the lack of English skills among the parents limits the kinds of communication that can occur between parents and school personnel.

Although this study does not provide the necessary data to substantiate how the parents exactly feel about their children, there is reason to believe that they would positively endorse the high goals of their children. From my own experiences in conversations with parents in colonias, I have found that education for their children is their main concern. Parents do not want their children to suffer the plight of poverty.

Thus, even though these youth have high aspirations and committed to their goals, the realization of these orientations will be highly influenced by the educational and vocational resources available to them.

First, it is imperative that school districts serving colonia children design career education programs pertinent to the needs and interests of students. Even though these programs are recommended for grades K-12, at the secondary level a career education program should be designed so that students can participate in a continuous basis throughout their high school years. These will provide the students with a better understanding of what is expected of workers, what occupation exist, and what educational and occupational paths lead to a particular career goal. Furthermore, the school districts need to provide an academic and technical curriculum that provide students with learning opportunities to develop their oral, written and analytical skills needed to prepare for different careers.

Given the parents language skills, school districts need to develop ESL programs to enhance the communications skills of parents. School districts should also ensure that personnel are bilingual and sensitive to needs of colonia families. This will get more parents involved with youth in thinking through life plans, career choices and educational needs. Parental involvement programs should be designed so that parents can be better informed and

Table 9

	Very Helpful	Some Help	Little Help	No Help
Parents	72.09%	17.44%	5.81%	4.65%
Friends	15.11%	47.67%	25.58%	11.62%
High School counselor	12.94%	31.76%	18.82%	36.47%
Teachers	32.55%	32.55%	22.09%	12.79%
Relatives other than parents	31.39%	34.88%	20.93%	12.79%
Movies or Television	20.93%	15.11%	32.55%	31.39%
Occupational handbooks	16.47%	23.52%	35.29%	24.70%
Personal job experience	20%	34.11%	20%	25.88%

thus have greater opportunity to participate. This will establish the basic framework for planned educational activities that will result in a close rapport between the parents, students and schools. In this manner, parents will have an opportunity to have a more active role in the education of their children.

Educational and governmental policy makers concerned with the educational plight of colonia children should carefully check their operating assumptions about what youth want or need. A continuous assessment of educational programs should be conducted at the local, state and federal level. This would provide legislators with an opportunity to optimize the impact of state and federal programs that are trying to assist colonias and school districts.

Thus, we recommend educational leaders assess family and community resources (i.e., professionals, libraries, museums, internships, community service opportunities) that will provide internships and work opportunities. Students should have opportunities to be mentored by teachers, professionals, community elders, and artists in the community. The school should develop challenging learning opportunities that engage the students with the community, such as oral history interviews. Learning opportunities should be developed that not only involve families and students using their capacities to solve problems, but also engage multiple institutions in the community (i.e., churches, businesses, community agen

cies) to enhance opportunities.

Challenging learning opportunities will enhance the possibilities for colonia children to achieve their educational and occupational aspirations. Given the isolation of the communities and the limited resources, schools have to maximize and leverage the school and community resources to expose students to knowledge and information that will complement academic rigor and achievement.

Given the social capital and community networking that exists within colonia residents, school districts need to develop comprehensive strategies that engage all of the community assets and focus them on educational needs of the students. Ultimately, the "impostura" will determine the commitment to the educational solutions determined at local level. Colonia children have high aspirations that are congruent with their counterparts in other communities, but public institutions need to optimize their resources to ensure these children receive challenging educational opportunities.

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